

Husband, Be a Gentlemen Chapter 21-40

Chapter 21

The following morning Yan Shi Ning woke up refreshed.

In contrast Pei Jin woke up frustrated. Yan Shi Ning was smiling mockingly at him and his frustrations calmed.

‘Wife, you can hide at the start of a month but you’ll be caught before the middle of a month,’ Pei Jin said.

Yan Shi Ning didn’t refute Pei Jin’s words. Instead she glanced in all four directions. She was satisfied they were alone and spoke softly. ‘Big brother, who do you think sent the assassins?’

‘Wife, you’re home,’ Pei Jin said. ‘You don’t need to be weary at home.’

Yan Shi Ning remembered everyone inside Pei Jin’s manor were within control of his palm, she realised she worried pointlessly. ‘Big brother, what do you think?’

‘Wife, what do you think?’ Pei Jin asked.

‘Anyone is possible,’ Yan Shi Ning said.

‘Why?’ Pei Jin asked.

‘The assassins attacked the emperor and the princes,’ Yan Shi Ning said. ‘It looks like they wanted to kill the Dian Kingdom’s emperor and heirs and cause chaos throughout the Dian Kingdom. If that’s true then who are the Dian Kingdom’s strongest enemies?’

Pei Jin nodded in agreement. ‘That’s a possibility.’

‘But there’s a flaw in that logic,’ Yan Shi Ning said. ‘Diplomats from Dian Kingdom’s strongest enemy kingdoms attended the banquet. If

they sent the assassins then there's no reason for them to risk sending their most talented ministers and warriors.'

'Um, you're right,' Pei Jin said. 'Besides imperial father wouldn't allow diplomats from enemy kingdoms to enter the palace without having them followed to find out if they were planning an ambush.'

Yan Shi Ning glanced in all directions and she smiled. 'You and your father share that same trait.'

'Of course, we're father and son after all,' Pei Jin said. 'If they won't sent by an enemy kingdom then who do you think is the culprit?'

Yan Shi Ning shook her head. 'I'm not certain. But I think that anyone else is a possibility.'

'Who else?' Pei Jin said.

Yan Shi Ning thought Pei Jin looked like he was in deep thought. 'Big brother, I think you know who the suspects are.'

Pei Jin nodded his head. 'But I want to hear your thoughts since my little lion loves to solve mysteries the most.'

'I think the first suspect is seventh prince,' Yan Shi Ning said. 'Even if he saved the emperor, who can be certain it's not a ruse to escape suspicion? He and the crown prince are the strongest candidate to become emperor. If he saves the emperor then his bond with the emperor would be stronger than the emperor's bond with the crown prince. Also, the assassins attacked the emperor, the crown prince and big brother. But the assassins didn't attack him. It's possible he wants to earn the emperor's gratitude and if the crown prince and big brother died during the attack then he'll have less threats.'

Pei Jin poured tea into two cups. 'Indeed seventh brother is a suspect. But if they were sent by seventh brother, he wouldn't leave a trail to trace back to him.'

‘I thought about that too,’ Yan Shi Ning said. ‘It’s also a possibility someone wants to frame seventh prince.’

‘Alternately, he purposely ordered them not to attack him to make him less suspicious,’ Pei Jin said. ‘Mixing truths and lies together is a tactic seventh brother likes to use to fool others.’

Yan Shi Ning remembered when she attended her first banquet in the palace, she wasn’t familiar with the surroundings and accidentally bumped into Pei Zhang. He looked at her condescendingly and his cold arrogance made him hateful.

Pei Jin noticed Yan Shi Ning was frowning while he drank tea. ‘What are you thinking?’

‘I don’t like Pei Zhang,’ Yan Shi Ning said. ‘I think he’s a dangerous person.’

‘More dangerous than me?’ Pei Jin teased.

‘No, big brother is a lot more dangerous than him,’ Yan Shi Ning said.

Yan Shi Ning spoke truthfully. Although Pei Zhang was cold hearted and wasn’t someone a person could easily befriend, Pei Zhang wasn’t as dangerous as Pei Jin. Because Pei Jin’s gentle and kind act allowed other people to dare to come closer to Pei Jin with their guards down.

Pei Jin saw Yan Shi Ning gritted her teeth and he smiled. ‘If you could choose to marry seventh brother or me, who would you choose?’

Heavens! Yan Shi Ning thought Pei Jin was asking her to choose between a dangerous man and a more dangerous man to marry.

Yan Shi Ning picked up a sweet bun and tucked it in Pei Jin’s mouth. ‘Eat!’

Pei Jin happily ate the sweet bun. ‘Who else do you suspect?’

Yan Shi Ning felt like talking to Pei Jin was like walking in different directions, from jests to sincere conversations.

‘The second and third suspects are the empress and the crown prince,’ Yan Shi Ning said. ‘They could have sent assassins to frame seventh prince. Big brother, think about why it’s strange the assassins attacked the crown prince and big brother but didn’t attack seventh prince. It’s a possibility the empress and the crown prince wants other people to suspect seventh prince. It’s a pity if they sent the assassins, they wouldn’t have anticipated seventh prince would risk his life to save the emperor.’

‘But to frame seventh brother by directly attacking imperial father wouldn’t benefit the empress,’ Pei Jin said. ‘If seventh brother didn’t protect imperial father... what would be the consequences? Supporters for seventh brother and the crown prince are strong on both sides. If the empress knows when victory is uncertain, she wouldn’t use that tactic.’

Yan Shi Ning realised Pei Jin understood everyone in the palace as much as he was familiar with his fingers.

‘Who else?’ Pei Jin asked.

‘Someone from Huang Guo’s manor,’ Yan Shi Ning said.

Pei Jin’s forehead creased, he didn’t expect Yan Shi Ning would also think people from Huang Guo’s side were suspects.

‘After the assassins were captured they killed themselves,’ Yan Shi Ning said. ‘To train assassins to be loyal and protect their master’s identity, their master needs to be someone who is powerful enough that the assassins would be scared to betray them. I did think about Consort La being a suspect. But Consort La’s relatives doesn’t have powerful connections.’

Pei Jin shook her head. ‘Wife, that’s a naive notion. Even if Consort La’s relatives doesn’t have powerful connections, thirteenth brother could become emperor and her relatives will gain more power. There are some people who are willing to gamble once for the biggest gain.’

‘Big brother, do you suspect Consort La?’ Yan Shi Ning asked.

Yan Shi Ning felt that Consort La was a gentle and sincere person and the loveable fool Pei Khan would struggle to become emperor.

‘I wanted to say that you shouldn’t dismiss someone if they don’t have powerful connections,’ Pei Jin said. ‘Because sometimes a person purposely make themselves appear like they have no powerful connections to hide their powerful connections.’

Yan Shi Ning thought Pei Jin was alluding to himself and she was curious if he secretly built powerful connections. ‘What about big brother?’

Pei Jin held Yan Shi Ning’s hand and his finger wrote yes on her palm.

Yan Shi Ning raised her head and looked closely at Pei Jin’s expression. In that moment the wind rattled the window.

‘Wife, it appears you’re fooled again,’ Pei Jin said.

Yan Shi Ning heard Pei Jin’s laugh until he was breathless and her heart pounded angrily. She couldn’t believe earlier she was willing to give herself to an expert liar.

Pei Jin felt that Yan Shi Ning was truly angry. He pulled her onto his lap and hastily consoled her. ‘I was teasing you. You were right about Huang Guo. He could have sent the assassins. Think about it, I wasn’t armed but the assassins were armed and they didn’t injure me. But if he sent the assassins, it’s strange why the assassins didn’t attack seventh brother.’

Pei Jin hugged Yan Shi Ning tightly. She ignored his shameless hands on her body and listened to his persuasive reasoning.

‘Big brother, if everyone is capable then who is the culprit?’ Yan Shi Ning asked.

Pei Jin nibbled Yan Shi Ning’s earlobe and blew in her ear. ‘Wife, you forgot someone.’

'Who?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'Your husband,' Pei Jin said.

Chapter 22

'You?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

Pei Jin nodded his head. 'While you're suspecting other people, other people are suspecting your husband.'

Yan Shi Ning thought it was reasonable other people would suspect Pei Jin who was a prince. But she glanced at his arm wrapped around her waist then at his free hand that was comfortably holding a cup of tea... she didn't believe he sent those assassins.

Yan Shi Ning knew if Pei Jin sent assassins, his enemies would be killed cleanly and none of his assassins would die.

'I almost forgot one more person,' Pei Jin said.

'Who else?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

Pei Jin looked at the dark blue sky outside. 'Imperial father.'

In the Chi Ruan chamber of the palace the emperor was reading reports from Southern Jiang. Although the news reported were good, he wasn't happy.

Wang Fu Mu, the emperor's advisor stood beside the emperor. He didn't fault the emperor for being unhappy. He knew the emperor was someone who liked all situations to be controlled within his hand.

'Wang Fu Mu,' the emperor said.

'Your servant is here,' Wang Fu Mu hunched his back and stepped toward the emperor.

'Who do you think did it?' the emperor asked.

'I think anyone is a possibility,' Wang Fu Mu said.

The emperor laughed coldly. 'I only wanted to see their true hearts and sacrificed some assassins. I didn't expect two assassins from outside the palace dared to enter the palace.'

'Your majesty, don't be angry,' Wang Fu Mu said.

'Go bring tenth crown prince and ninth prince here!' the emperor ordered.

'Yes your majesty,' Wang Fu Mu said.

Back in Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning's chamber, she was shocked by who he suspected.

'How can that be?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'Why not?' Pei Jin asked. 'Imperial father is capable of anything.'

'Why would he order assassins to attack himself and his sons?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

Yan Shi Ning didn't believe the emperor would do something foolish.

Pei Jin felt cold thinking about his ruthless father. He hugged Yan Shi Ning and spoke in a sad tone. 'Wife, you don't understand him. I think he did it to see who he should support to become his heir.'

Yan Shi Ning reflected on Pei Jin's words for a while. 'It's possible he wants to see in a life and death situation who would save him.'

Pei Jin nodded his head. 'He is someone who doesn't easily trust another person.'

Yan Shi Ning took a deep breath, it was an insane situation. But if the emperor was the culprit then his purpose was to see who he could trust without risking anyone's life.

‘Big brother, do you think seventh prince’s wish will be granted?’ Yan Shi Ning asked.

‘Perhaps,’ Pei Jin said.

‘Then last night the emperor acted outraged?’ Yan Shi Ning asked.

‘Your father-in-law is also someone who knows how to perform well,’ Pei Jin praised.

Yan Shi Ning felt Pei Jin’s body relaxed a little.

‘Wife, do you think seventh brother or crown prince will make a better emperor?’ Pei Jin asked.

Pei Jin asked Yan Shi Ning a question that the world speculated secretly. But his teasing tone felt like he was asking her, ‘which taste better, a white radish or a carrot?’

‘Big brother, can’t you ask me more discreetly?’ Yan Shi Ning asked.

‘Alright, what taste better, a white radish or a carrot?’ Pei Jin asked and wrapped his arms around Yan Shi Ning’s waist tighter.

‘The white radish is a little too cruel,’ Yan Shi Ning said. ‘If it becomes emperor, it’ll be a tyrant ruler. The carrot...’ An image of a delicate and beautiful crown prince in her head made her hesitate. ‘Carrot looks a little indecisive.’

‘What about the little red radish?’ Pei Jin asked.

Yan Shi Ning knew Pei Jin asked about Pei Khan and she smiled. ‘The little red radish is scared of death. When scared, it will bury its head into a person’s chest.’

‘Then those radishes and that carrot isn’t easy to eat,’ Pei Jin said.

‘Um,’ Yan Shi Ning said.

Pei Jin had anticipated Yan Shi Ning's answer. He lowered his head and kissed her. 'Wife, it appears you can only eat my radish. My radish is fragrant and delicious. Come here and eat it.'

When there was no gap between Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning's lips, a maid's voice was heard from outside their chamber.

'Ninth prince, mistress, a palace messenger is here,' the maid said.

Pei Jin waited outside the Chi Ruan chamber.

Pei Jin could smell the strong herbal scent of the incense sticks while waiting outside.

A while later the crown prince opened the door. The crown prince looked like he was suppressing his frustrations and a little sadness.

'Ninth brother,' Pei Lam said.

'Tenth brother, you're here too,' Pei Jin said.

Wang Fu Mu walked to the door before Pei Lam could answer.

'Ninth prince, come inside,' Wang Fu Mu said.

Pei Jin looked at the crown prince, nodded his head and entered the Chi Ruan chamber. He immediately saw shattered stone pieces on the floor and his heart became weary.

The emperor tossed a report at Pei Jin.

'Do you have something to say?' the emperor asked.

Pei Jin picked up the report from the floor. He feigned shock and knelt on the shattered stone pieces. 'Imperial father, I was framed.'

‘Two of the assassins were from Southern Jiang!’ the emperor said coldly. ‘You were in Southern Jiang for two years. Indeed you gathered good people!’

Pei Jin’s face whitened. ‘I was framed.’

‘I’m only giving you one chance to explain,’ the emperor said.

Pei Jin knelt on the cold shattered stone pieces long enough for its coldness to flow to his heart. ‘I have no interest in the emperor’s position.’

The emperor understood the unspoken meaning behind Pei Jin’s words, ‘I don’t want the throne. I’ve given up military power and wasted my earnings. I wish to be a carefree prince. Why would I need to kill my father and brothers?’

The emperor saw Pei Jin’s straight back while Pei Jin knelt and noticed Pei Jin was no longer shocked and fearful like earlier. The emperor slitted his eyes at the eyesore in front of him, he realised he had never been able to see through Pei Jin.

The emperor’s heart knew clearly which two princes were battling for the throne. But those two princes had strengths that satisfied his expectations and weaknesses that he couldn’t tolerate. It was hard for him to choose between the two without seeing their true hearts.

So the emperor ordered Wang Fu Mu to sacrifice some assassins at the harvest festival banquet and chose the seating arrangements for the three princes. He truly wanted to know when he was in danger, who would save him. But two assassins from Southern Jiang turned his plan into chaos. Although seventh prince saved him, it wasn’t the result he wanted.

The emperor wanted to know who dared to send those two assassins into the palace! The imperial guards investigated the two assassins’ backgrounds, but nothing certain was discovered.

The emperor knew the assassins attacking him, the crown prince and ninth prince would make seventh prince the first suspect. But he knew seventh prince wouldn't use such an obvious tactic. Besides, seventh prince wouldn't risk dying to save him if seventh prince sent those assassins.

The emperor thought about the crown prince being attacked to frame seventh prince. Especially the crown prince's mother, the empress saw seventh prince as her biggest eyesore and could have sent the assassins to the palace. So he summoned the crown prince to interrogate the crown prince. But he didn't expect the crown prince knelt and dared to say, 'Imperial father if you suspect me then take away my crown prince status.'

The emperor broke his favorite ink stone the moment he heard the crown prince easily threatened to forfeit a privilege position and he felt like the blood in his body flowed backward. In that moment he could have used a sword to stab the crown prince to death! He felt like he wasted many years to train the crown prince.

Of course the third suspect was ninth prince. The emperor received a report from the imperial guards' investigation, 'the assassins are soldiers from Southern Jiang and are acquainted with ninth prince.'

A long time past but Pei Jin remained kneeling with his back straight while the emperor's dagger eyes watched Pei Jin closely.

'You can stand!' the emperor said.

Pei Jin bowed his head and stood unsteadily. Wang Fu Mu rushed to him and helped him stand.

'Thank you official Wang,' Pei Jin said.

The emperor's heart was moved when he saw the blood stains on Pei Jin's knees and on the shattered stone pieces on the floor.

'At that time, your first reaction was to protect your wife,' the emperor said in a gentler tone.

Pei Jin's father's sudden words startled Pei Jin but he nodded his head and he saw his father's eyes became clouded.

'At that time, beside you was the crown prince and your thirteenth brother,' the emperor said.

'Everything happened suddenly,' Pei Jin said. 'I didn't have time to think. I hope imperial father can forgive me.'

The emperor understood Pei Jin's unspoken explanation, 'I followed my instincts and protected what was most important in my heart.'

'You can go home,' the emperor said. 'You're a newly wedded man, be happy with your wife.' He paused for a while. 'The little girl Shi Ning isn't bad. In a life and death situation she still wanted to protect Xiao Khan.'

Last night while the emperor was attacked, he carefully assessed the princes' reactions first. Afterward he noticed Shi Ning hugged Pei Khan tightly then Pei Jin stood in front of them and protected them.

After Pei Jin left the Chi Ruan chamber the emperor sighed and looked at Wang Fu Mu. 'Find something valuable to send to ninth prince's manor.'

'Yes your majesty,' Wang Fu Mu said. 'Your majesty never suspected ninth prince then why did you interrogated him in that way?'

Wang Fu Mu saw the emperor only smiled after the emperor read the imperial guards' report. He knew Pei Jin wouldn't leave such an obvious trail. Besides, Pei Jin wouldn't benefit anything from the assassination attempt. He was certain someone purposely wanted to frame Pei Jin. But he didn't expect the emperor to interrogate Pei Jin in such a ruthless manner.

The emperor stared at the door in deep thought. 'Out of my sons, he is the hardest one to see through. I wanted to know what ninth prince is thinking inside his heart.'

Wan Fu Mu understood the emperor's heart had never been at ease toward ninth prince.

'Perhaps ninth prince's heart never had that desire,' Wang Fu Mu said cautiously.

The emperor's eyes darkened and Wang Fu Mu's body shook. 'Your majesty, forgive me for saying too much.'

Outside the palace gates Pei Jin smiled coldly and limped slightly into the horse carriage.

Chapter 23

A rumor spread throughout the Dian Kingdom about the assassination attempt in the palace.

Some citizens speculated a foolish enemy kingdom dared to send assassins to kill their emperor and princes. Their purpose was to seize the kingdom. Those citizens heard the emperor ordered the northern army to move back thirty li and seize three territories of an enemy kingdom.

Other citizens gossiped about how seventh prince heroically used his body to save the emperor. They thought although seventh prince was stabbed, he was also the person who benefited the most from the assassination attempt.

In the palace, seventh prince was recovering in bed while Consort Mu took care of his injury. Seventh prince and Consort Mu's servants reported to them about the rumors spread outside the palace. Seventh prince and Consort Mu smiled with each other and they rewarded their servants.

The crown prince's supporters were worried about seventh prince's heroic reputation so they spread a rumor outside the palace that seventh prince was the person who sent the assassins to the palace.

In contrast to the chaos in the palace, the atmosphere inside Pei Jin's manor was tranquil.

Since the day Pei Jin returned from the Chi Ruan chamber he followed his father's order and stayed home with Yan Shi Ning. Of course he stayed home while Yan Shi Ning was in an inconvenienced state otherwise he would have taken her sightseeing.

That morning Pei Jin was sitting in Bei Dou's chamber and rubbing a herbal remedy on his knees. The shattered stone pieces pierced through his knees deeper than expected.

'It appears it'll leave a scar,' Pei Jin said.

'Why won't you more attentive that day?' Bei Dou asked.

'If I didn't kneel on the shattered stone pieces then how can I feign shock that day?' Pei Jin asked. 'Isn't it good that I'm learning from seventh brother's tactic? Besides, I'm happy I got to see how worried little lion was about me.'

Pei Jin remembered that day he returned home from the palace, Yan Shi Ning saw the blood stains on his knees and she was worried enough for her soul to float away.

'I didn't think Pei Zhang would use his body to save the emperor,' Bei Dou said.

Pei Jin pulled his pants down and stood to wash his hands. 'Seventh brother was certain he wouldn't die. A shallow stab isn't going to harm his healthy body.'

'It's a pity he was rewarded,' Bei Dou said.

Pei Jin smiled. 'That's uncertain.'

'Why?' Bei Dou asked suspiciously.

'My imperial father isn't a fool,' Pei Jin said. 'Imperial father saw that seventh brother could have easily pushed the sword away but seventh

brother chose to let the sword stab him. It's a pity imperial father hates other people acting in front of him the most. Seventh brother's heroic display was only rewarded by imperial father's disdain. Imperial father is naturally a suspicious person. It looks like he is favoring seventh brother by letting seventh brother stay in the palace to recover... but imperial father purposely detained seventh brother in the palace to make it easier for him to investigate who sent the assassins. If seventh brother had behaved and focused on recovering in the palace, he would have earned imperial father's trust... a pity Consort Mu impatiently sent servants to spread news about seventh brother's heroic deed and made imperial father more suspicious of seventh brother.'

Bei Dou listened to Pei Jin's explanation and he realised his assumptions were naive.

'The crown prince is more intelligent than seventh prince,' Pei Jin said. 'After the assassination attempt the crown prince acted like his body's weak and stayed in the Eastern chamber to rest. It made the empress angry enough to break off fingernails. I'm uncertain whether the crown prince is truly giving up his position or if he's waiting for a good opportunity to retaliate.'

'If you had let me enter the palace to assassinate the crown prince then you wouldn't be as troubled as you are now,' Bei Dou said.

Pei Jin knew if he had let Bei Dou wield a sword at the palace that day then the crown prince would no longer be under the same sky as them.

'Bei Dou, I didn't send the two assassins to kill people,' Pei Jin said.

'Then what was the purpose?' Bei Dou asked.

Pei Jin looked out the window and he saw the cloudy sky and the palace in the distance. 'I merely wanted them to be in a chaotic state. If imperial father is more suspicious of them then they would be too busy retreating to cause trouble for me. Indeed being a carefree prince isn't bad.'

Pei Jin picked up a fan Yan Shi Ning gave him and waved it in front of him to blow away the worries in his head.

Of course Bei Dou didn't believe Pei Jin's simple reason. According to the news Bei Dou received, the emperor was suspicious of seventh prince and the crown prince. The emperor also demoted all the court officials that were secretly cooperating with Huang Guo. That news startled him. He realised if Pei Jin had listened to his advice and cooperated with Huang Guo then no one in Pei Jin's manor would be safe.

'You knew long ago the emperor was suspicious of Huang Guo's motives,' Bei Dou said.

Pei Jin looked at the words beautifully embroidered on the fan and smiled. 'In the past I wasn't certain but after imperial father demoted their positions, it confirmed my intuition. Twelve years ago Huang Guo's sudden resignation would make people suspicious.'

Bei Dou thought that Pei Jin's strategic skills were better than he expected.

'I'm going back to my chamber to play with the little lion,' Pei Jin said.

Pei Jin walked to the door but he remembered something he forgot to ask Bei Dou and turned his head around to face Bei Dou. 'I almost forgot why I came here.'

Bei Dou was curious what else Pei Jin wanted to discuss.

'Honestly, how long does a woman's inconvenience time last?' Pei Jin asked. 'Last time I asked, you said it lasts for four to five days. But it's past six days, why isn't my wife well?'

Bei Dou glared at Pei Jin, he wanted to vomit blood. Heavens! What was he? A woman? How was he supposed to know? He brushed his sleeves to vent his anger and left his chamber.

Pei Jin watched Bei Dou leave in an angry state. Afterward he rubbed his chin and realised the little lion wasn't inconvenienced.

Pei Jin bought many books for Yan Shi Ning.

The books were all about nature. In the last six days Yan Shi Ning did open the books and read. She read books about love stories hidden behind the nature books... it was troublesome being a prince's wife, she couldn't let other people see her reading love stories.

Yan Shi Ning was absorbed in another love story when she felt someone entered the chamber. She raised her head and saw Pei Jin was holding a cuju ball (Chinese football).

'Wife, you can play with it,' Pei Jin said.

Yan Shi Ning frowned at the cuju. What was she? A three-year-old?

'What's good about it?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

Pei Jin feigned surprise. 'Little lion, shouldn't you be happy you get to hold a cuju?'

Yan Shi Ning wasn't happy.

Pei Jin soothed the angry Yan Shi Ning. 'Alright, I was teasing you. Messengers of the dressmaker Su delivered dresses here, come here and see the dresses.'

'Why are there more dresses?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'Didn't I promise you there'll be many more dresses?' Pei Jin asked.

After Yan Shi Ning opened three big chests and two small chests, she was shocked to see many dresses, shoes, makeup and jewellery. Heavens! It was enough for her to wear for many years. Also, one glance and she knew they were all expensive.

More chests were brought into the chamber and Yan Shi Ning couldn't restrain her shock.

'Big brother, you're insane!' Yan Shi Ning said.

Pei Jin laughed. 'It's hard to be insane a few times while alive.'

Yan Shi Ning couldn't believe what she saw. In her memories Pei Jin was an excessively frugal person. In the past if he wanted to buy dried dates, he would trick her to use her money to buy dried dates. So his sudden generosity made her suspicious a demon possessed his body.

Yan Shi Ning admitted that everything inside the chests were beautiful... until she opened a chest of undergarments and her face turned red. They were too thin and would expose too much skin. If a person wore them, it would be the same if they didn't wear undergarments.

'Big brother, why did you buy... them?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

Pei Jin looked innocently at Yan Shi Ning. 'It's not my fault. I asked the dressmaker to choose the best fabrics. I didn't know the fabric quality would be this good.'

Pei Jin's heart laughed happily. He asked the dressmaker to choose the thinnest fabrics to make Yan Shi Ning's undergarments. After seeing them, he was satisfied the fabrics were thinner than his expectations.

Yan Shi Ning saw the bright gleam in Pei Jin's eyes and she realised he was the one who instructed what fabrics to use. How could such a person exist? Her heart cursed him, 'if you want to buy them then buy as many as you want. There's nothing you can do if it's not worn.'

Pei Jin's heart saw through Yan Shi Ning's heart, 'It'll be hard for them to not to be worn.'

That night Yan Shi Ning was weary while she was bathing. Indeed that person came to watch her bathe like he did the other nights. She slowly lowered her body under the flowers petals and ignored him.

Pei Jin was a little disappointed only Yan Shi Ning's head was visible above the flower petals. But his purpose that night wasn't to see a spring scenery. He clasped his hands behind his back and circled the bath tub once and he silently returned to the bed.

Yan Shi Ning was suspicious. Usually Pei Jin would tease her while she was bathing. But that night he changed his habit.

‘Wife, I’m going to the calligraphy room,’ Pei Jin said. ‘I forgot I left something there.’

Yan Shi Ning pouted her lips. Who would care about where that person wanted to go?

After the water turned cold, Yan Shi Ning wanted to get out of the bath tub. She reached for her clothes... they were gone!

Yan Shi Ning remembered earlier Pei Jin walked suspiciously around the bath tub while hiding his hands behind his back... he took her clothes and replaced them with the thin undergarments.

Yan Shi Ning gritted her teeth. Her heart wanted to curse and whip him a hundred times, ‘Pei Jin, you scoundrel!’

Yan Shi Ning didn’t wear the undergarments. She got out of the bath tub and ran to the bed since Pei Jin was in the calligraphy room.

Unfortunately Pei Jin was lying on the bed and smiling lecherously at Yan Shi Ning.

‘Wife, why are you dressed like this?’ Pei Jin asked. ‘Do you want to seduce your husband? But your husband is a gentleman.’

Chapter 24

Pei Jin’s eyes ate Yan Shi Ning’s smooth skin, tempting collar bone and two peach nipples. He hardened faster than he jumped off the bed.

Pei Jin’s arms gripped Yan Shi Ning’s waist and he kissed her before she could answer him.

Yan Shi Ning stepped back away from Pei Jin, but he pulled her closer and he kissed her fiercely. Behind her was a table, she had nowhere to

retreat. His lips were like their master, salvage and forceful. She tilted her head back and propped her hands on the table to stop her unsteady legs from collapsing. He held her tightly until she could feel his hardness.

Pei Jin's lips released Yan Shi Ning's swollen lips and kissed down to her tempting collar bone. His teeth didn't resist and bit her collar bone.

Yan Shi Ning's head spun after Pei Jin's kiss. Then she felt a sudden sharp pain on her collar bone.

'Ah!' Yan Shi Ning cried out.

Pei Jin smiled like a demon and his tongue licked the teeth mark on her collar bone.

'Wife, you admit biting a person hurts,' Pei Jin teased.

Yan Shi Ning was about to retort but her body felt lighter, she was in Pei Jin's arms and he carried her onto the bed.

'I, I... it's inconvenient,' Yan Shi Ning lied.

'Alright, let your husband check for you,' Pei Jin said.

Yan Shi Ning panicked while Pei Jin's hand moved below her stomach. She held onto his hand, the heavens knew she stopped bleeding a day ago but she wanted to fool him.

'Wife, what are you doing?' Pei Jin asked and looked accusingly at Yan Shi Ning's hands.

Yan Shi Ning couldn't laugh or cry.

'Wife, you dare lie to me?' Pei Jin asked. 'I'll show you what happens when you lie to me.'

Pei Jin rolled Yan Shi Ning on her stomach and he bit the sensitive spot on her lower back. During the nights he kissed everywhere on her body and he discovered the most responsive part of her body was a spot on

her lower back. One light touch there on her lower back and he would feel her body shake.

Pei Jin patiently waited for Yan Shi Ning, but she lied to him so he abandoned his patience.

Yan Shi Ning was lying on her stomach and she couldn't move her body. Pei Jin swept her hair over her head. She couldn't turn her head around, she could only feel his warm lips kissed her shoulder and slowly down on her back. His hands gently stroked her back while his teeth bit and his tongue soothed the bitten spots on her back. The tingly itch on her back quickly spread to the rest of her body and she moaned. After she felt the pressure on her back lightened she arched her back.

Pei Jin heard Yan Shi Ning's moan and he smiled. He bit her neck, his left wrist kneaded small circles on her waist and his right hand slid from her neck to her soft breasts. His fingers teased her two peach nipples that ripened under his fingers and he heard her moaned loudly.

Pei Jin rolled Yan Shi Ning onto her back. Her face was flushed red like the flesh of a gac fruit. Her eyes were misty as fog.

Pei Jin smiled and pinched Yan Shi Ning's flushed cheek. 'Let's begin our wedding night.'

Pei Jin began to take off his clothes.

Yan Shi Ning's heart pounded chaotically and her head continued to spin. She gasped for air while watching Pei Jin take off his clothes. On the night they bathed together, he was naked but she didn't get a chance to carefully look at his naked body. But she didn't expect the spring scenery in front of her to be that hard and desirable.

Yan Shi Ning knew Pei Jin was a handsome man with clothes on, but without clothes he was more handsome and could easily trap a person in a trance.

'Wife, your intense leering is making your husband shy,' Pei Jin teased.

Yan Shi Ning awoken from Pei Jin's trance and she realised they were both naked.

'I... I...' Yan Shi Ning said incoherently in her nervous state.

Pei Jin's body pressed down onto Yan Shi Ning's body and his hands clasped her hands. He blew on her red soft lips and he reassured her. 'Wife, don't be nervous. I'll take care of you.'

Pei Jin's lips kissed the red soft lips he loved the most.

'Umm...' Yan Shi Ning moaned.

Pei Jin's tongue mingled with Yan Shi Ning's tongue and numbed her mouth. She arched her body up, moaned and his kiss deepened.

Yan Shi Ning's head spun faster and in the midst of the chaos she felt Pei Jin's hardness between her thighs. She pressed her thighs tightly together and her nervousness returned.

'Wife, don't move,' Pei Jin said. 'Let me pleasure you first so later when I enter you won't feel pain.'

Pei Jin didn't want Yan Shi Ning to feel pain so he prolonged satisfying his desire.

Pei Jin's fingers were stroking inside Yan Shi Ning's sensitive spot between her thighs as though his finger strokes were a thousand worms were wiggling. His mouth swallowed her loud moan.

Pei Jin felt Yan Shi Ning's whole body trembled underneath his body. Afterward her body tensed and relaxed. He withdrew his fingers, saw them covered with her sweet dew and knew it was the right opportunity to enter her.

Pei Jin parted Yan Shi Ning's thighs and his hardness thrust inside the sweetness between her thighs.

'Ah!' Yan Shi Ning cried out.

Yan Shi Ning felt like a sword stabbed between her thighs. Her forehead creased and tears flowed down her cheeks.

Pei Jin's face muscles tensed and his lips softly kissed Yan Shi Ning's cheeks.

'Bear the pain a little longer,' Pei Jin said.

Pei Jin's hardness slowly moved deeper inside Yan Shi Ning.

'Ah, ah, it hurts!' Yan Shi Ning cried out.

Yan Shi Ning didn't remember anything about being a gentle lady and she cried loudly like a little child.

Pei Jin's heart ached after seeing Yan Shi Ning's tears of pain. He kissed her lips and consoled her. 'Soon it won't hurt anymore.'

'Ah, can you stop?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

Yan Shi Ning couldn't bear the excruciating pain and she cried louder.

Pei Jin wiped the tears off Yan Shi Ning's face and his hands clasped her hands tightly. 'Shi Ning, I waited for a long time, don't ask me to wait longer.'

While Yan Shi Ning was distracted, Pei Jin withdrew and thrust hard into her body...

Yan Shi Ning didn't know when she fell asleep, but after she woke up she felt her whole naked body ached and a naked Pei Jin slept peacefully beside her.

Yan Shi Ning remembered about what happened before she slept and she blushed. She looked at Pei Jin, they were finally husband and wife and felt like everything was insanely beautiful.

In the past Yan Shi Ning thought about who she would marry, but she never thought she would marry Pei Jin. Although he used to tease her and said he would marry her when she was an adult, she never believed

him. After he was betrothed to another woman, she was happy she could escape him. She never expected after circling each other, he would run to her and marry her.

Suddenly Yan Shi Ning felt something was suspicious. She felt like Pei Jin always wanted to eat her, but she didn't understand why he didn't eat her on their wedding night. Did he want to wait for her until she would be willing? But if she didn't fool him then he would have eaten her earlier. She realised he fooled her again! She grabbed his hand and bit his hand.

Pei Jin felt someone bit his hand and woke up. He saw Yan Shi Ning's angry face and he laughed.

'Wife, why are you angry?' Pei Jin asked. 'Is it because you're not satisfied with your husband's performance?'

Weariness replaced Yan Shi Ning's anger and she shook her head.

Pei Jin hugged Yan Shi Ning and kissed her forehead. 'Today I can't eat you otherwise you'll feel pain.'

Yan Shi Ning blushed and she sighed in relief.

'Be patient and wait until tomorrow,' Pei Jin said.

Yan Shi Ning widened her eyes.

Pei Jin saw Yan Shi Ning's weariness, shook his head and he sighed. The heavens knew that day he wasn't satisfied with only eating her once. But he knew she was a fierce little demoness and he needed to slowly persuade her to accept her fate.

Chapter 25

Yan Shi Ning slept through the rest of the night.

The following morning Yan Shi Ning woke up and didn't see Pei Jin. She asked a maid to prepare a water basin for her to wash her face then she changed into a dress.

After Yan Shi Ning washed and dressed, she slowly walked toward the gardens. It was still painful between her legs, but she didn't want the maids to know what happened and forced herself to straighten her back.

Yan Shi Ning circled the gardens and returned to her chamber but she didn't see Pei Jin.

'Where's ninth prince?' Yan Shi Ning asked a maid.

'Mistress, ninth prince is visiting Gentleman Bei,' the maid said.

Yan Shi Ning nodded her head and she remembered the physician Bei Dou who wore black clothes and a stiff expression on his face.

Yan Shi Ning felt that Bei Dou had a cold aura. She thought that even someone cold would have a face that at least occasionally changed expressions. But each time she met him, his face stayed the same stiff expression. It made her curious about his real identity and why Pei Jin treated him sincerely.

Yan Shi Ning didn't ask Pei Jin about Bei Dou. She knew Pei Jin had many secrets. But she was happy to be Pei Jin's wife who ate and slept. Suddenly she felt hungry and was about to ask a maid to bring her food from the kitchen but Pei Jin entered their chamber with a platter of food.

'Wife, why aren't you sleeping?' Pei Jin asked and put the bowl of beef congee and the bowl of cong you bings on a table.

The delicious fragrance brightened Yan Shi Ning's eyes. After the maids left the chamber, she tucked a cong you bing in her mouth. While she was chewing, the pain between her legs increased and she took deep breaths.

Pei Jin saw Yan Shi Ning frowned. 'Wife, what's wrong?'

‘It hurts!’ Yan Shi Ning said and looked at Pei Jin accusingly.

Pei Jin laughed and carried Yan Shi Ning onto the bed.

‘What do you want to do?’ Yan Shi Ning asked wearily.

Yan Shi Ning swallowed the cong you bing in her mouth and looked at Pei Jin suspiciously. Outside the window the sky was still bright, she didn’t know how he could shamelessly want to eat her.

Pei Jin lifted Yan Shi Ning’s dress and took off her pants and undergarments while smiling shadily at her.

Yan Shi Ning pulled down her dress and she scrunched her face like an angry bore. ‘You... you... it’s still morning.’

‘Wife, does that mean... if it isn’t morning then it’s alright?’ Pei Jin asked.

Pei Jin took out a jade bottle from his pouch and poured some of the herbal remedy on his fingers.

Yan Shi Ning remembered Pei Jin’s fingers teased her body last night and she wanted to hit him. Then she was curious about the sweet scent from the herbal remedy on his fingers. ‘What is that?’

‘It’s good,’ Pei Jin said.

Pei Jin pulled Yan Shi Ning’s hands away from her dress and inserted his fingers between her legs.

Yan Shi Ning’s whole body stiffened the moment she felt his fingers inside her.

‘Wife, you don’t need to be nervous,’ Pei Jin said. ‘I’m only rubbing the herbal remedy inside to soothe the pain.’

Pei Jin wanted to continue teasing Yan Shi Ning, but he saw her anxiously bit her lower lip and decided to be honest.

Pei Jin remembered Yan Shi Ning cried out in pain throughout the night so earlier in the morning he woke Bei Dou up. He ignored Bei Dou's resentment for being woken up too early and asked Bei Dou for a herbal remedy. Bei Dou didn't ask him what kind of herbal remedy he wanted instead Bei Dou's forehead to the neck turned red. Then Bei Dou wrote the name of the herbal remedy on a paper and told him to go buy it.

Yan Shi Ning's body relaxed after Pei Jin explained the purpose of the herbal remedy. But she felt a strange sensation having his fingers gently stroked inside her and her body stiffened again.

'I... I... can do it myself,' Yan Shi Ning stuttered.

'Wife, can you see where the sore spots are?' Pei Jin asked.

Yan Shi Ning bit her lower lip. She did feel shy about inserting her fingers inside herself. But it was better than having his fingers inside her.

Yan Shi Ning held onto Pei Jin's arms. 'I can do it myself.'

'Alright, you can do it yourself,' Pei Jin said. His fingers circled inside her one more time and withdrew. 'But I finished putting it on the sore spots.'

Yan Shi Ning glared at Pei Jin's rotten smile.

Pei Jin pulled out a handkerchief and consoled Yan Shi Ning while he wiped his fingers. 'Wife, don't be sad. We can't this time, but there'll be a next time soon.'

Yan Shi Ning's heart cursed Pei Jin, 'Sad your sister!'

Yan Shi Ning put on her undergarments and pants then she kicked Pei Jin off the bed.

Pei Jin pulled Yan Shi Ning off the bed with him. She fell on top of him. Then he rolled her under him and she opened her mouth but his mouth swallowed her curse.

Earlier Pei Jin felt frustrated while his fingers were inside Yan Shi Ning's body. He thought it wasn't right that a delicious meat was in front of him but he had to endure. He wondered when he could eat to his satisfaction.

Pei Jin thought one day soon he needed to be a bandit and pluck Yan Shi Ning otherwise he feared he would die from starving himself.

Yan Shi Ning felt Pei Jin kissed her long enough to make her forget to breathe. She noticed the bowl of congee on the table and pushed him off her.

'The congee will be cold soon,' Yan Shi Ning said.

Pei Jin knew if he continued kissing Yan Shi Ning, it would be hard for him to stop so he let her push him off her.

Yan Shi Ning happily ate the bowl of delicious beef congee and occasionally bit a cong you bing.

'Did you change the head cook of your manor?' Yan Shi Ning asked.
'Why does the food taste better than usual?'

Yan Shi Ning finished eating the whole bowl of beef congee. Then she remembered since she arrived at Pei Jin's manor, the cooks' food weren't as delicious as the cooks' food at the Yan Manor. It wasn't a surprise because Princess Kang Hua and Yan Shi Ting used a lot of money to hire a cook from a famous restaurant in the imperial city. But she was surprised the food Pei Jin bought earlier tasted better than the cooks' food at the Yan Manor.

Pei Jin was happy Yan Shi Ning liked the food he bought for her. But he knocked her forehead after he heard her said 'your manor.'

'Wife, what is the head cook of your manor?' Pei Jin asked. 'Do you still see yourself as an outsider?'

Yan Shi Ning rubbed her sore forehead and glared at Pei Jin. But she admitted she wasn't used to thinking of herself as the mistress of Pei Jin's manor.

'The cooks in our home didn't make these dishes,' Pei Jin said. 'I bought it at Fu Qing on the way to buy the herbal remedy.'

The mention of 'Fu Qing' brightened Yan Shi Ning's eyes. Before she arrived at the imperial city, she heard of Fu Qing, the best restaurant in the imperial city. After she lived in the Yan Manor, she never had the opportunity to eat at Fu Qing. She was happy she got to wear clothes from Su's dressmakers and eat food from Fu Qing.

Pei Jin saw the excitement on Yan Shi Ning's face and he rubbed his chin. 'Wife, do you want to go there?'

Yan Shi Ning looked suspiciously at Pei Jin. 'Can we actually go there?'

'Wife, do you want to see the singers and musicians perform?' Pei Jin asked.

'Yes,' Yan Shi Ning said.

'Alright, then we can go,' Pei Jin said.

On the way to Fu Qing, Yan Shi Ning thought about a childhood memory inside the horse carriage. That year a group of singers and musicians visited Xuan Qing to perform. Other children her age had their mothers take them to see the singers and musicians perform. She wanted to go too but her mother didn't have enough money and her precious pouch was light as a cat's whisker. In her sad state, Pei Jin stood in front of her and asked, 'Do you want to see the singers and musicians perform?'

Yan Shi Ning couldn't ignore Pei Jin after she heard his question and she foolishly nodded her head. Afterward he actually did take her to see the singers and musicians perform. But they didn't buy tickets at the entrance like other people... they climbed a wall.

That night was cold but Yan Shi Ning's heart was warm. She sat on the wall and saw the singers and musicians perform on a platform while she ate dried dates. That day she thought life was beautiful... of course if that thief didn't steal a copper coin from her precious pouch to buy the dried dates then life would have been more beautiful.

'Little sister, I took you to see the singers and musicians perform,' that thief said. 'But why haven't you thanked me?'

Yan Shi Ning's childhood memory from that year reminded her to be weary of Pei Jin.

'Did you bring enough money?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

Yan Shi Ning was worried Pei Jin was taking her to climb another wall.

Pei Jin looked at the Yan Shi Ning dressed in a man's clothes and wanted to laugh because she couldn't disguise her feminine beauty. He pulled out a paper note worth one thousand silver taels and put it inside her inner robe. 'I don't have silver taels. Wife, you'll be the host.'

Yan Shi Ning was shocked to see the paper note... how rich was Pei Jin?

Pei Jin took Yan Shi Ning for a stroll around the imperial city.

The streets were crowded with people, there were many sights to see and food to taste. Yan Shi Ning thought she could relax after leaving the manor with Pei Jin. But two of Pei Jin's guards followed them around the imperial city so she was forced to act like a gentleman in her disguise.

Pei Jin noticed Yan Shi Ning's reluctance to move around freely.

'Guards, you don't need to follow us,' Pei Jin said to his guards. 'You can go find a place to drink wine.'

Yan Shi Ning began to worry a little after the guards left. 'Is it safe? What if there are assassins?'

Before Yan Shi Ning left the manor, she hesitated to leave because of the assassination attempt in the palace. But Pei Jin reassured her and brought guards with them outside the manor.

Pei Jin didn't know what to explain to Yan Shi Ning to reassure her. What was he supposed to say? Wife, don't worry two of those assassins were sent by your husband?

After thinking for a while Pei Jin chose the most tactful explanation to reassure Yan Shi Ning. 'Wife, don't worry there are guards secretly following us.'

Half of Yan Shi Ning believed and the half of her suspected Pei Jin's explanation. But if there were guards secretly following them then she could continue to play on the streets.

Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning continued sightseeing until she noticed someone familiar. She held onto his arm to stop him.

'Who does that person look like?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

Pei Jin's eyes followed Yan Shi Ning's gaze. He saw a familiar woman walk out of a medicine shop and the woman held a bundle.

'Widow Li?' Pei Jin asked.

Yan Shi Ning was happy Pei Jin recognised widow Li too and that her eyes weren't mistaken.

Pei Jin was happy Yan Shi Ning was holding his arm. She was pulling him in the direction of widow Li.

After Widow Li bought the medicine, she began walking home with a heavy conscience. Her conscience became heavier the moment she saw who stood in front of her and her face paled.

'Mistress Yan,' widow Li said.

Yan Shi Ning looked happy to see widow Li. But Pei Jin didn't understand why widow Li looked scared to see Yan Shi Ning.

‘Widow Li, didn’t you say you were travelling south?’ Yan Shi Ning asked. ‘Why are you in the imperial city?’

Widow Li pretended to fix her hair to think of a reasonable explanation. ‘I... I was planning to visit my older cousin in the south. But he said he wanted to be a merchant in the imperial city so I came here with him.’

‘If you’re in the imperial city why didn’t you look for me?’ Yan Shi Ning asked.

‘I... I can’t be that shameless to look for you,’ widow Li said.

‘Let’s find a place to sit and talk,’ Pei Jin said.

‘Uh, no I have somewhere I need to be,’ widow Li declined.

Pei Jin glanced at the bulky bundle of medicine widow Li was carrying.

‘Widow Li, why did you need to buy a lot of medicine?’ Pei Jin asked.

Widow Li sighed sadly. ‘My older cousin is ill. Mistress Yan, ninth prince, I’ll leave first. I need to prepare the medicine for him.’

Widow Li hurriedly left without waiting for Yan Shi Ning and Pei Jin’s reply.

Yan Shi Ning looked at widow Li’s back and frowned. ‘Pei Jin, do you think that widow Li has changed?’

Pei Jin was relieved Yan Shi Ning noticed the change in widow Li’s personality too.

‘Perhaps something has happened,’ Pei Jin said. ‘I forgot, Bei Dou asked me to buy some medicine for him. Wife, wait for me here. I’ll go inside to buy the medicine and I’ll come out soon.’

Pei Jin walked into the shop and requested to see the shop owner.

‘What medicine did the woman who came into your shop earlier buy?’ Pei Jin asked.

The shop owner told Pei Jin what medicine widow Li bought and it made Pei Jin more uneasy.

Pei Jin knew the medicine widow Li bought were expensive. Widow Li was wearing ordinary clothes, he didn't understand how she could afford to buy expensive medicine. Also, the shop owner said that she was a regular customer who had been buying the same medicine for many months. He wondered where widow Li would find more than one thousand silver taels to buy the medicine frequently.

Pei Jin remembered widow Li's panicked expression the moment widow Li saw Yan Shi Ning and his intuition warned him that something was wrong. He decided after he returned to the manor, he would ask some of his guards to wait nearby the medicine shop and secretly follow widow Li.

Pei Jin thought if widow Li was in trouble, he would help widow Li because widow Li was important to Yan Shi Ning. But if widow Li was hiding a dangerous secret involving Yan Shi Ning then he would be prepared to stop widow Li from harming Yan Shi Ning.

Chapter 26

Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning stood in front of Fu Qing's three entrances.

Fu Qing was separated into three terraces and each terrace had three floors.

'Why does Fu Qing have more than one entrance?' Yan Shi Ning asked.
'Which entrance do we walk through?'

'Wife, which entrance do you want to walk through?' Pei Jin asked.

Yan Shi Ning heard lively songs and the sounds of instruments from the left terrace. 'I want to walk through the left entrance.'

‘Wife, it’s not suitable for you to walk through the left entrance,’ Pei Jin said.

‘Why?’ Yan Shi Ning asked.

Pei Jin whispered something in Yan Shi Ning’s ear and she blushed.
‘That kind of place exists?’

Pei Jin nodded his head innocently like he heard that place existed but never been inside.

‘What about the middle entrance?’ Yan Shi Ning asked.

‘It’s where proper food is served,’ Pei Jin said.

Yan Shi Ning looked at the right door and she smiled playfully. ‘Then there must be handsome food behind the right entrance.’

Pei Jin had a strange feeling.

Indeed Pei Jin followed Yan Shi Ning through the right entrance. He silently asked the heavens to not let him meet anyone that knew him. If people found out gentle ninth prince visited those kind of places, he feared everyone would be shocked enough for their chins to fall.

‘I’m here to play with handsome beauties,’ Yan Shi Ning said.

A man dressed in black clothes embroidered with flowers greeted Yan Shi Ning and Pei Jin then the man escorted them to the stairs.

Yan Shi Ning was happy to be surrounded by beauties. The beauties were all young men who had pink lips, white teeth and were friendly.

Pei Jin pinched Yan Shi Ning’s waist. ‘Have you leered enough?’

Yan Shi Ning glared at Pei Jin, pulled out a fan and she waved it in front of her face. ‘Of course I haven’t.’

Yan Shi Ning looked at her surroundings and she noticed most of the guests walked to the second floor. So she walked to the second floor too.

A man who greeted guests on the second floor thought Yan Shi Ning was a regular guest by the way Yan Shi Ning confidently walked to the second floor.

‘Master, are you looking for someone familiar?’ the man asked.

Yan Shi Ning thought the handsome man looked about thirty years old who had a soothing voice.

‘Someone familiar?’ Yan Shi Ning asked.

The man saw Yan Shi Ning looked confusedly at Pei Jin. He realised they were new guests and assumed Pei Jin was the guest who carried a heavy pouch.

Pei Jin draped an arm over Yan Shi Ning’s shoulder.

‘No need, take us to a free room,’ Pei Jin said.

A guest interrupted them and passed the man a paper note worth fifty silver taels. ‘Gentleman Chen, tonight I want Yue Feng to serve me.’

Gentleman Chen accepted the paper note and gave the guest Yue Feng’s plaque.

Yan Shi Ning saw the guest and Gentleman Chen’s exchange and she understood what someone familiar meant.

Yan Shi Ning took out one of the ten paper notes worth one hundred silver taels that she exchanged earlier at a pawn shop and gave it to Gentleman Chen. ‘I... we... Gentleman Chen make arrangements for us.’

Pei Jin thought Yan Shi Ning learned bad habits fast.

Gentleman Chen accepted Yan Shi Ning’s paper note, gave Feng Su and Yu Lu’s plaques to Yan Shi Ning and escorted Yan Shi Ning and Pei Jin to a room.

Inside the room was two beds, paintings of handsome men and a marble table. On the table was a vase, a small fragrant pouch, a tea pot and cups.

Yan Shi Ning stared at a painting of a handsome man for too long, Pei Jin pulled the painting off the wall and threw it on the ground.

‘What are you doing?’ Yan Shi Ning asked.

‘Wife, can’t you see your husband is more handsome?’ Pei Jin asked.

Yan Shi Ning looked at Pei Jin from the top of his head to his feet. ‘I can’t see.’

Pei Jin regretted taking Yan Shi Ning outside the manor.

Yan Shi Ning was amused to see Pei Jin was frustrated to death.

Yan Shi Ning and Pei Jin were drinking tea on a bed when Feng Su and Yu Lu entered the room.

Yan Shi Ning put her cup of tea on the nearby marble table. She thought the two young men looked sixteen years old. Their long hair were straight and smooth like a thin fabric, a red flower was painted in the middle of their foreheads and their steps were dainty.

Pei Jin noticed Yan Shi Ning’s mouth and eyes widened. He wondered why he didn’t discover she was a pervert long ago. Then he wondered why she didn’t perve at him in the past. He compared himself to the two young men and thought she must love to perve on handsome weaklings.

Feng Su knelt in front of Yan Shi Ning. ‘Master, Feng Su is here to serve you.’

Yu Lu knelt in front of Pei Jin. ‘Master, Yu Lu is here to serve you.’

Yan Shi Ning didn’t have experience in that kind of situation and felt uncomfortable. But she saw Pei Jin gave her a ‘coming here doesn’t suit you’ look so she straightened her back.

Yan Shi Ning used a fan to lift Feng Su's chin. 'How do you want to serve me?'

Pei Jin spat tea out of his mouth.

Yu Lu quickly pulled out a handkerchief and wanted to wipe the tea off Pei Jin's face. But Yu Lu's body was too close to Pei Jin's body and Pei Jin politely declined.

'I can do it myself,' Pei Jin said.

Pei Jin glared at Feng Su. If Feng Su dared to touch Yan Shi Ning's body, he vowed to toss Feng Su out the window.

Luckily Feng Su didn't touch Yan Shi Ning's body. 'Master, however you want me to serve you.'

Goose bumps rose on Yan Shi Ning's whole body. 'Alright.'

In that moment a fuwu brought a platter of food and wine jars into the room.

At the sight of food and wine Yan Shi Ning ignored the handsome beauties in the room. She was about to pick up a pair chopsticks but Feng Su was faster.

Feng Su held a prawn between chopsticks in front of Yan Shi Ning's mouth. 'Master, I'll serve you.'

Yan Shi Ning glanced at Pei Jin. Although he was smiling at her, she knew his smile was a threat, 'Wife, do you dare to eat?'

Yan Shi Ning smiled at Pei Jin and opened her mouth.

Pei Jin angrily picked up the cup of wine Yu Lu poured and drank it.

Yan Shi Ning sniffed the wine fragrance and thought it smelt sweeter than fruits.

‘Beauty, pour wine for your master,’ Yan Shi Ning said and touched Feng Su’s smooth hand.

Pei Jin’s heart wanted to cut off Yan Shi Ning’s hand after they returned to the manor. He drank another cup of wine.

Yu Lu noticed the cold deadly aura around Pei Jin and quickly poured more wine into Pei Jin’s cup.

Feng Su raised a cup of wine to Yan Shi Ning’s lips. ‘Master, this is Tan Hua Tu. It’s Fu Qing’s best wine.’

Yan Shi Ning drank the cup of wine and nodded her head. ‘It’s good wine.’

‘Master, drink slowly,’ Feng Su said.

Pei Jin gritted his teeth after he saw Feng Su’s chest nearly touched Yan Shi Ning’s chest.

Feng Su pulled out a handkerchief and was about to wipe wine off Yan Shi Ning’s lips but Pei Jin stood and pushed Feng Su away from Yan Shi Ning.

Pei Jin hugged Yan Shi Ning and he smiled at the shocked Feng Su and Yu Lu.

‘You’re both not needed here,’ Pei Jin said. ‘You can both leave and remember to close the door.’

Feng Su and Yu Lu immediately left the room.

Outside the room Yu Lu spoke softly with Feng Su. ‘What did we do wrong?’

‘Nothing, we served them well,’ Feng Su said. ‘The master I was serving liked me.’

‘But the master I was serving didn’t like me,’ Yu Lu said. ‘He didn’t even glance at me once. He only looked at the master you were serving.’

‘Perhaps... they are a pair of lovers,’ Feng Su said. ‘Or the master you were serving loves the master I was serving.’

‘I think that’s possible,’ Yu Lu said.

‘Do you think the master I was serving loves the master you were serving?’ Feng Su asked.

‘I’m not certain,’ Yu Lu said. ‘Even if there’s no love, love could grow later. The master I was serving asked us to close the door. I think he can’t control himself anymore.’

Feng Su nodded his head. ‘The Tan Hua Tu fragrance is an aphrodisiac. But if he’s too forceful it’ll hurt.’

‘It has no relation to us,’ Yu Lu said. ‘That’s between the guests. We need to report to Gentleman Chen. I’ve served many guests, but this is the first time I was asked to leave.’

Chapter 27

‘Wife, do you love leering at beauties?’ Pei Jin asked and moved closer to Yan Shi Ning.

Yan Shi Ning smiled and moved back on the bed.

‘Wife, do you want someone to serve you?’ Pei Jin asked.

Pei Jin pulled Yan Shi Ning over his lap and hit her bottom hard three times.

‘Wife, this is for leering at other men, touching another man’s hand and letting another man be near you,’ Pei Jin said.

‘You MF, you dare hit me!’ Yan Shi Ning cursed.

Pei Jin hit Yan Shi Ning’s bottom three more times.

'I dare hit you,' Pei Jin said. 'Who forced you to perve at other men? Touch another man's hand? Be near another man?'

Tears of anger and pain fell down Yan Shi Ning's face. 'You're a wild animal!'

'Wild animal?' Pei Jin asked. 'Wife, if you say you're husband is a wild animal then I don't want you to be wrong.'

Yan Shi Ning knew she was in trouble but it was too late to escape.

Pei Jin pulled Yan Shi Ning upright. They were face to face and her legs straddled his thighs. He leaned forward, the bed was low and she wrapped her legs around his waist to stop herself from falling. He stripped her disguise until only the white fabric that bound her breasts was left.

Yan Shi Ning felt Pei Jin's hardness pressed against her bottom and her hands quickly protected the white fabric. 'You... what do you want to do... ah!'

One of Pei Jin's hand held Yan Shi Ning's hands behind her back, his other hand unbound the white fabric and exposed her breasts.

'Ah!' Yan Shi Ning cried out.

Pei Jin bit Yan Shi Ning's left breast.

'You... be gentle!' Yan Shi Ning said.

Pei Jin bit Yan Shi Ning's right breast and kissed her lips. She struggled to free her hands while her soft bottom was grinding his hardness.

'Wife, stop moving or I'll eat you here,' Pei Jin threatened.

Yan Shi Ning immediately stopped moving.

Pei Jin looked at Yan Shi Ning's pitiful face and he didn't want to scare her anymore. But he didn't want to let her go too easily.

‘Wife, do you want someone to serve you?’ Pei Jin asked. ‘Your husband will serve you well.’

Pei Jin picked up the cup of wine from the table, drank the wine, opened Yan Shi Ning’s mouth and his mouth transferred the wine into her mouth.

Yan Shi Ning choked a little and wine flowed out of her mouth. Pei Jin licked the wine off her face and kissed her. He savored her taste combined with the fragrant wine.

Yan Shi Ning felt like her body was gradually burning. Suddenly she felt thirsty and licked the sweet wine off Pei Jin’s tongue.

Pei Jin was startled, it was the first time Yan Shi Ning didn’t avoid his kiss. His hands quickly held her face and he deepened the kiss.

Yan Shi Ning didn’t know when her hairpin fell but her black hair fell past her bare shoulders. Her face was as red as the bite marks on her breasts. She felt like a fire was burning her whole body and she felt even thirstier so she moved her bottom to reach for the wine jar.

Pei Jin gripped Yan Shi Ning’s waist to stop her bottom from grinding his hardness.

Yan Shi Ning couldn’t reach the wine jar but Pei Jin’s mouth was within reach.

The longer Yan Shi Ning’s tongue licked Pei Jin’s tongue, the more he felt his self-control lessen. His hands left Yan Shi Ning’s waist and lingered on her soft bottom. He didn’t want to eat her at Fu Qing and was about to pick up the tea pot to help sober them but she grabbed the wine jar.

Yan Shi Ning tilted her head back and poured all the wine into her mouth.

Pei Jin watched the wine flowed out of Yan Shi Ning's mouth and flowed down her chin, neck, breasts... he couldn't watch idly anymore and licked the wine off her breasts.

Yan Shi Ning's body tingled after Pei Jin's tongue licked her breasts. She moaned and raised her chest closer to his mouth.

'Pei Jin, my body feels hot,' Yan Shi Ning said and rubbed her bottom against Pei Jin's hardness.

Pei Jin didn't know why Yan Shi Ning's body felt hotter than last night. But he saw the need in her eyes and kissed her lips.

'Shi Ning, wait,' Pei Jin said.

Pei Jin's hand touched Yan Shi Ning's sweetness between her legs. The moment his fingers entered her, she closed her eyes and moaned.

After Pei Jin heard Yan Shi Ning's moan, his fingers stroked harder inside her until her body tensed and fell limp on his chest.

'Wife, it's your turn to pleasure me,' Pei Jin said.

Pei Jin pulled off his pants, raised Yan Shi Ning's waist and his hardness entered her wet sweetness.

'Ah!' Yan Shi Ning cried out.

Pei Jin savored the sensation of Yan Shi Ning's inner muscles that was tightening around his hardness. Then he bit hard on her earlobe.

'Wife, bear the pain,' Pei Jin whispered in Yan Shi Ning's ear. 'We'll receive a pleasurable reward soon.'

Yan Shi Ning bit her lower lip. She felt Pei Jin's hardness thrust deeper inside her. Her legs wrapped tighter around his waist and her hands held onto his shoulders.

Pei Jin's hardness moved in and out of Yan Shi Ning's sweetness while he sucked her nipples.

A while later Yan Shi Ning's fingernails dug into Pei Jin's shoulders, her whole body trembled and she moaned loudly.

Pei Jin's hardness thrust into the deepest part of Yan Shi Ning's sweetness and his hardness released semen.

Afterward Yan Shi Ning fainted on Pei Jin's chest.

Pei Jin's hardness withdrew from Yan Shi Ning's body. He picked up the white fabric, wiped his semen off her inner thighs and his hardness. Then he dressed her and himself but she still didn't wake up. He looked at her beautiful flushed face and couldn't resist kissing her lips.

After Yan Shin Ning awoken she saw Pei Jin was starting at her chest.

'Pei Jin, what wicked thoughts are you thinking?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

Pei Jin looked at Yan Shi Ning's naive face as though she didn't remember what happened between them earlier. He wondered if she was actually drunk while he ate her. In his memories she loved wine. He remembered she used to steal sips of wine from his teacher in Xuan Qing. But that night she drank a whole wine jar, it would be strange if she wasn't drunk.

Pei Jin glanced at the untouched food on the table and he gently patted Yan Shi Ning's cheek. 'Wife, don't sleep yet. Wait until we're home.'

Yan Shi Ning nodded her head that felt light. She struggled to stand so she held Pei Jin's arm.

'Let's go home together,' Yan Shi Ning said.

Yan Shi Ning's warm words entered Pei Jin's heart and his eyes stung happily.

Pei Jin wrapped an arm around Yan Shi Ning's waist and he helped her walk toward the door.

Suddenly Pei Jin wondered why earlier Yan Shi Ning's body was strangely hot. Was she drunk or did she desire him? Also, why couldn't he control himself?

Pei Jin turned his head around and his eyes swept the room and stopped at the table. Was there medicine in the food? Fu Qing was famous for their food and wouldn't risk their reputation. Then he stared at the fragrant pouch... after he returned to the manor he would send his guards to secretly investigate Fu Qing.

Chapter 28

Pei Jin braced Yan Shi Ning's shoulders outside the room.

Fu Qing's other guests were curious about the identities of the handsome Pei Jin and the drunk Yan Shi Ning. But it was an unspoken agreement that each of Fu Qing's guests would be blind to other guests' behaviour to protect their own identities.

In that moment Yan Shi Ning's head spun, her legs were wobbly and she felt pain between her thighs. She didn't remember everything that happened but she didn't doubt it was the MF Pei Jin's fault. She was about to curse him but her eyes saw someone familiar in front of them and her mouth gaped open.

Pei Jin's eyes followed Yan Shi Ning's gaze. There was nothing unusual to see a young handsome beauty in front of them. It was the familiar young man next to the beauty that was a surprise – the crown prince.

Pei Lam was shocked to see Pei Jin in a place unsuitable for a gentleman. But he felt like he was possessed by a demon, he was curious to see what kind of man Pei Jin desired. He looked at the drunk man Pei Jin was supporting and his heart jumped... it was Yan Shi Ning.

Pei Jin was startled to see the crown prince was smiling inappropriately at Yan Shi Ning then he pulled her into his chest and shielded her from

the crown prince's view. Inwardly he sighed, she lost her gentle lady image in front of the crown prince.

'Is ninth sister drunk?' Pei Lam asked.

Pei Jin nodded his head.

'I have a horse carriage waiting outside,' Pei Lam offered.

'Xiao Tu is waiting outside for my wife and me,' Pei Jin declined.

A silence followed after Pei Jin and Pei Lam's polite exchange.

'Crown prince, you're a beauty,' Yan Shi Ning said in her drunk state.

Pei Jin thought Yan Shi Ning became more daring by the day while her gentle lady image was gradually thinning. She even dared to tease the crown prince. He felt it was an injustice that she praised other men's looks but didn't praise his looks.

Pei Jin pinched Yan Shi Ning's waist to warn her to stop speaking nonsense.

'MF, why do you love pinching me?' Yan Shi Ning asked and pinched Pei Jin's hand.

Pei Jin choked helplessly. He was helping Yan Shi Ning protect her lady image but she was ungrateful.

Pei Lam looked enviously at Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning's loving exchange.

'Ninth brother and ninth sister's loving bond makes other people envious,' Pei Lam said.

'My wife is drunk,' Pei Jin said. 'Tenth brother forgive her drunken behaviour. I'll take her home first.'

Pei Lam nodded his head and he watched Pei Jin carry Yan Shi Ning downstairs.

‘Master, do you want to continue playing?’ a young man asked.

Pei Lam shook his head. ‘I’m not in the mood to play anymore.’

The young man knew the crown prince had a good personality but the crown prince was a difficult master to serve. The crown prince was someone if given a new toy, they would play with it for a few times and throw it away. The past few days the crown prince was unhappy so he suggested the crown prince should visit Fu Qing for a new experience. The crown prince agreed but he didn’t expect the crown prince wouldn’t be in the mood to play the moment the crown prince arrived at Fu Qing.

Pei Lam didn’t know what he was thinking. He could only say to others that he didn’t like something but he couldn’t voice what he truly wanted. Since he was a young boy, everything good was set in front of him, but his elders always made his life decisions for him.

Pei Lam wanted to be free of his cage and experience the outside world. But the furthest his cage extended was to a place like Fu Qing. It made him felt like he was living a hopeless life.

Day and night, Pei Lam felt like that sense of hopelessness was burning him. Each day Yan Shi Ting would ask a palace maid to deliver a love letter to him. He read the first few love letters then later he asked one of his servants to read them and write a reply in his stead.

That night in the palace Pei Lam laid in his bed and thought about Yan Shi Ning. He remembered her liveliness and the red bite marks on her neck, immediately his little brother hardened. His hand rubbed his little brother until semen was released.

Away from the palace the drunk Yan Shi Ning was sinking in a bath tub. Pei Jin pulled her body above the water, took off his clothes and bathed together with her so she wouldn’t drown.

Inside the bath tub Yan Shi Ning sat on his lap while his hands rubbed her soft breasts.

In Yan Shi Ning's drunk state she could still feel Pei Jin's hardness was rubbing against her bottom and his hands were rubbing her breasts. She leaned her face close to his face and bit his lips.

Pei Jin pinched Yan Shi Ning's bottom. 'Wife, why did you bite me?'

'Pei Jin... umm... ah... you MF, you're always bullying me... umm...'
Yan Shi Ning murmured while her body trembled.

Pei Jin carried Yan Shi Ning's wet limp body to the bed. He dried her body first then he dried his body. Afterward he laid next to her and stroked her back. 'Wife, inside your heart am I only someone who bullies you?'

Yan Shi Ning didn't answer. But the night air cooled and her body searched for the warmest spot on the bed. After the warmest spot was found, she moaned and slept peacefully.

Pei Jin didn't dare move. Yan Shi Ning's head was laying on his chest, her arms wrapped tightly around his waist and she draped a leg over his thighs. If he moved then he wouldn't want to stop moving.

Pei Jin pinched Yan Shi Ning's nose and scratched her waist. She scrunched her face but refused to wake up.

'Shi Ning,' Pei Jin said.

Yan Shi Ning opened her eyes, saw Pei Jin and closed her eyes again.

'Shi Ning,' Pei Jin said.

'Huh?' Yan Shi Ning murmured.

Pei Jin rubbed the childish Yan Shi Ning's head and whispered in her ear. 'Shi Ning, the MF Pei Jin who bullies you, do you love him?'

Pei Jin knew Yan Shi Ning was an honest drunk and he anticipated her answer.

'I don't love him,' Yan Shi Ning said and rolled over.

Pei Jin hit Yan Shi Ning's bottom. 'Heartless little demon. I treat you well but you don't hesitate to say you don't love me.'

Yan Shi Ning rubbed her sore bottom in her sleep. 'MF, you dare hit me again.'

'Then is Pei Jin a handsome man?' Pei Jin asked.

Yan Shi Ning didn't open her mouth.

'Shi Ning?' Pei Jin asked.

Yan Shi Ning snored.

Pei Jin hugged Yan Shi Ning. But he felt like he was hugging a delicious meat and he couldn't sleep.

If Pei Jin moved a little lower then he could eat Yan Shi Ning. His heart wavered between eating and soothing her body pain.

A while later Pei Jin got out of bed and picked up the herbal remedy he bought for Yan Shi Ning. He remembered he roughly ate her at Fu Qing and thought she would feel pain between her thighs in the morning.

Pei Jin returned to the bed, spread Yan Shi Ning's legs and rubbed the herbal remedy inside her. He heard her moan and knew the herbal remedy was soothing her body but it also erected his desire.

Chapter 29

Yan Shi Ning stirred in her sleep. She dreamt fingers were stroking inside her and moaned.

'Little lion, you have a responsive body,' Pei Jin teased and his fingers stroked faster inside Yan Shi Ning.

Yan Shi Ning's hands clutched the blanket and she couldn't stop moans from escaping her throat. Her body was close to the peak but suddenly

the fingers stopped and her body was trapped between frustration and pleasure.

Yan Shi Ning opened her eyes and saw Pei Jin was smiling too brightly.

Pei Jin swept Yan Shi Ning's sweaty hair away from her mouth. He kissed her lips and his fingers slowly stroke inside her. She bit her lips and anticipated the strange pleasurable sensation.

'Do you want to?' Pei Jin asked and withdrew his fingers.

'Umm...' Yan Shi Ning murmured.

Pei Jin parted Yan Shi Ning's legs wider and his hardness swiftly entered her.

'Ah, ah!' Yan Shi Ning cried out and gripped the blanket tighter.

Pei Jin's hardness grind deep inside Yan Shi Ning's most sensitive spot and felt her body tremble. His hands lifted her bottom and his hardness moved swiftly in and out of her body.

The bed rocked, the beaded curtains shook and the spring scent filled the chamber.

The loud grunts and the joining of naked flesh would make even a moon deity blush.

Yan Shi Ning's body peaked many times under Pei Jin's body. The louder she moaned the swifter his hardness moved in and out of her body.

Yan Shi Ning cried tears of pleasure and hers hands gripped Pei Jin's arms.

'Be gentle... it hurts!' Yan Shi Ning pleaded.

Pei Jin's hardness stilled inside Yan Shi Ning's body. 'Shi Ning, say my name.'

‘Pei Jin, Pei Jin, Pei Jin!’ Yan Shi Ning said.

Yan Shi Ning spoke louder each time she said Pei Jin’s name, because his hardness would withdraw and thrust harder inside her body each time she said his name.

‘Pei Jin! Be gentle... ah!’ Yan Shi Ning pleaded.

Pei Jin felt Yan Shi Ning’s body peaked again yet he hadn’t peaked once that night. He kissed her lips and coaxed her. ‘Shi Ning, be good. Bear the pain a little longer. If you stop me now then I’ll eat you until the morning.’

Pei Jin lifted Yan Shi Ning’s bottom higher and his hardness moved faster and deeper inside her body.

‘Ah... ah... Pei Jin, how much longer?’ Yan Shi Ning asked.

‘Soon, Shi Ning wrapped your legs around my waist,’ Pei Jin said.

‘Ah... ah...’ Yan Shi Ning cried out.

‘Don’t move... umm... stay in that spot,’ Pei Jin said.

‘Ah... ah... you’re bullying me again,’ Yan Shi Ning said.

‘Be good,’ Pei Jin said. ‘In the future I won’t bully you again.’

‘Liar!’ Yan Shi Ning said.

‘Shi Ning, this time we’ll feel pleasure together,’ Pei Jin said.

No gaps were visible between Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning’s joined bodies. She felt his semen flooded inside the deepest part of her body. She arched her body, felt that strange pleasurable sensation again, cried out loudly and fainted.

After Pei Jin’s body peaked, his body relaxed and he felt refreshed. He picked up the fallen blanket, hugged Yan Shi Ning and covered their bodies with the blanket. That night they both slept peacefully.

The following morning Yan Shi Ning woke up in pain. She didn't have energy to even move a finger. She wondered what happened last night.

Yan Shi Ning looked at Pei Jin's naked body that was hugging her naked body and knew what happened last night. He ate her last night! She shook her head and frowned... how did he get to eat her?

Yan Shi Ning remembered clearly at Fu Qing the MF Pei Jin hit her bottom. Afterward he pulled off her clothes and kissed her. Then she felt her body was hot and she willingly kissed and licked Pei Jin... but when did they return to the manor?

Yan Shi Ning blushed at the memories that flowed through her head. She couldn't believe she kissed and licked the MF Pei Jin... she didn't doubt he was going to mock her to death!

Yan Shi Ning felt she was an insane drunkard and lost her dignity.

Pei Jin woke up and saw Yan Shi Ning was pouting her lips. 'Wife, what are you thinking about?'

'It hurts!' Yan Shi Ning said.

'Where does it hurt?' Pei Jin asked.

Pei Jin stood up naked in front of Yan Shi Ning and she pulled the blanket over her face.

'It hurts everywhere!' Yan Shi Ning said.

Pei Jin wore his clothes, walked outside and asked a maid to prepare a basin of water. Then he returned to the bed and massaged Yan Shi Ning's body.

'Who forced you to drink too much last night?' Pei Jin asked.

'Last night what did I do?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'Wife... last night you did too many things,' Pei Jin teased.

‘Like what?’ Yan Shi Ning asked.

‘You praised the crown prince’s looks,’ Pei Jin said.

Yan Shi Ning took deep breaths... she lost her gentle lady image.

‘Why didn’t you stop me?’ Yan Shi Ning asked.

Pei Jin sighed helplessly. ‘Wife, don’t you remember? I did try to stop you but you were drunk.’

Yan Shi Ning listened to Pei Jin recounted what else happened and she wanted to mourn her lost gentle lady image.

‘I knew your real personality before you married me,’ Pei Jin said. ‘So if you lost your gentle lady image, it’s alright. You don’t need to act gentle anymore.’

Yan Shi Ning was too angry to speak. She knew if she lived together with Pei Jin there would be a day her real personality would be exposed.

Pei Jin saw Yan Shi Ning was angry from her head to her feet, it made him wanted to tease her more. ‘Also... it’s a pity you don’t remember. Last night, you were excessively aggressive and your gentle husband couldn’t cope.’

Pei Jin smiled at Yan Shi Ning and licked his lips.

Yan Shi Ning remembered how she kissed and licked Pei Jin. She rolled over and hid her embarrassed face on the pillow.

‘Wife, you don’t need to be embarrassed,’ Pei Jin said. ‘We’re married. But it appears your expectations are too high. In the future your husband will need to exert more energy. Why don’t we do it again now?’

Pei Jin’s hands stroked Yan Shi Ning’s back.

Yan Shi Ning raised her head, glared at Pei Jin and hid her embarrassed face on the pillow again.

A while later Yan Shi Ning got out of bed and bathed. Afterward her head still hurt and she wanted to go back to sleep. But she saw a maid carried out the stained blanket and she didn't have anywhere to hide on the bed.

Pei Jin pulled Yan Shi Ning onto the bed and rubbed the herbal remedy between her thighs. Then they ate a morning meal together. After the meal, she slept while Pei Jin visited Bei Dou's chamber.

Pei Jin recounted what happened at Fu Qing to Bei Dou.

'Do you think it's strange that even the crown prince was there?' Pei Jin asked.

'No, I think it's strange your wife was there,' Bei Dou said.

Pei Jin was speechless.

'You dote on your wife too much,' Bei Dou said.

'Of course,' Pei Jin said.

'That's not good,' Bei Dou warned.

'I think we should talk about something else that's stranger,' Pei Jin said.

Bei Dou was skeptically silent.

'I know my boundaries,' Pei Jin said.

'Destruction under a beauty,' Bei Dou said.

'Elder Ma says that too,' Pei Jin said.

'Why did the crown prince go there?' Bei Dou asked.

'Perhaps he was too free and wanted new amusement,' Pei Jin said.

'When I saw him, he was calm like usual. I don't think he's involved.'

'Then why did you go there?' Bei Dou asked and gave Pei Jin a don't-you-know-you're-a-prince-too look.

‘That’s what’s strange,’ Pei Jin said. ‘You know I’m a cautious person. I wouldn’t go anywhere that’s dangerous.’

‘You suspect someone at Fu Qing?’ Bei Dou said.

‘In the past I ate in the middle terrace of Fu Qing and nothing strange happened,’ Pei Jin said. ‘I think it’s someone from the right terrace.’

‘Brothels usually use aphrodisiac fragrances,’ Bei Dou said.

‘Aphrodisiac fragrances are used in the middle terrace too,’ Pei Jin said. ‘I’ve breathed it in before and it didn’t affect me. I suspected it’s the wine but Fu Qing is a reputable place for food and wine so they wouldn’t tamper with the wine.’

‘Then what do you want?’ Bei Dou asked suspiciously.

‘I need to inconvenience Gentleman Bei to personally go there and investigate,’ Pei Jin requested.

‘No!’ Bei Dou refused and blushed.

‘You’re a healthy twenty-two year old man but you’re no different from a monk,’ Pei Jin provoked.

Bei Dou straightened his sleeves and left his chamber.

Chapter 30

Bei Dou paced back and forth in front of Fu Qing’s three entrances.

Bei Dou didn’t know if he should walk through the left or right entrance. He took a deep breath and walked through the right entrance.

Bei Dou thought men wouldn’t want to serve someone like him. The moment he was inside he realised his thoughts were too naive.

Someone named Man Feng served Bei Dou. Bei Dou thought he was in the wrong place because Man Feng looked and walked in a feminine way.

‘Are you a man?’ Bei Dou asked.

‘You’re hateful,’ Man Feng said flirtatiously. ‘If I’m not a man, do you think I’m a woman?’

Man Feng knelt in front of Bei Dou who sat on a bed.

Man Feng usually served regular customers but he made an exception for Bei Dou. He loved serving men like Bei Dou who looked cold on the outside but was naive on the inside.

‘Master, I’ll pour wine for you,’ Man Feng said.

Bei Dou was repulsed by the strong fragrance on Man Feng’s body, he moved back on the bed.

Man Feng raised the cup of wine to Bei Dou’s mouth. ‘Master, I’ll feed you.’

Goose bumps rose on Bei Dou’s skin and he grabbed the cup of wine from Man Feng.

‘I have hands,’ Bei Dou said.

Bei Dou drank the wine and frowned. After he walked into the room he could smell the pouch fragrance but it wasn’t harmful. But combined with the wine it was a strong aphrodisiac. Also, the fragrance and wine brewer needed to be highly skilled to make such a strong aphrodisiac.

Bei Dou thought the brewer’s skills were impressive. He wondered if the purpose was to stimulate their guests or to extract secrets from their vulnerable guests.

Since the brewer wasted a lot of energy to make a strong aphrodisiac then Bei Dou wasn’t going to disappoint the brewer. But he wasn’t

affected by the strong aphrodisiac and thought for a while how to act drunk.

‘Ah... my head hurts,’ Bei Dou said and slowly swayed his head side to side.

Man Feng laughed softly. ‘Master, of course your head hurts. You drank too fast. Don’t you know how to drink slowly? Or is it master has many grievances? You can tell me your grievances, it’ll improve your mood.’

Bei Dou felt repulsed being touched by another person. But he needed to act drunk so his body didn’t recoil from Man Feng’s hand on his chest. He decided he was going to wash his body thoroughly after he returned to the manor.

‘Master, what’s upsetting you?’ Man Feng asked.

‘My master forced me to do something I didn’t want to do,’ Bei Dou said.

‘Who is your hateful master?’ Man Feng asked.

Bei Dou continued to sway his head.

‘Master, who is your hateful master that forced you to do something you don’t want to?’ Man Feng asked.

Bei Dou thought Man Feng was a beautiful man and had a persuasive voice. If it was someone else, Man Feng would have extracted all their secrets from birth. But he wasn’t someone else. The strong aphrodisiac and Man Feng’s beauty didn’t affect him. He knew if he wanted to find out why Fu Qing wanted to extract secrets from their guests, he needed to use a little honesty to fool Man Feng.

‘My master is gentle ninth prince,’ Bei Dou said. ‘He forced me to... to...’

Man Feng’s eyes brightened after he heard gentle ninth prince. ‘What did gentle ninth prince force you to do?’

‘He forced me to... too... I can’t say...’ Bei Dou said.

Ma Feng heard ‘I can’t say’ and wanted to vomit blood.

Bei Dou slowly stood and swayed his body. ‘It’s late. I need to return to the manor otherwise gentle ninth prince will be suspicious.’

Man Feng watched Bei Dou staggered outside. He regretted he couldn’t extract secrets from a golden duck like Bei Dou.

After Bei Dou left Fu Qing, Man Feng searched for Gentleman Chen.

Ma Feng found Gentleman Chen outside a guest and a woman server’s room.

‘Gentle ninth prince sent one of his servants here?’ Gentleman Chen asked.

‘Yes,’ Ma Feng said.

‘Gentle ninth prince protects his manor like a steel cage,’ Gentleman Chen said. ‘He doesn’t easily give secrets away. I didn’t expect him to send someone through our door. It’s our good fortune. Did you send someone to follow his servant?’

‘Yes,’ Ma Feng said.

‘Good,’ Gentleman Chen praised. ‘Take good care of this fish for me. I want to see what he plans to do.’

After Bei Dou lost the man Fu Qing sent to follow him, he rushed to his chamber, took three warm baths to rid of the strong fragrance on his body and slept on his bed.

Early the following morning Bei Dou was woken up by loud knocks on the door.

Bei Dou got out of bed, opened the door and saw Pei Jin’s spring smile then he wanted to close the door.

‘Wait,’ Pei Jin said. He entered Bei Dou’s chamber, closed the door and teased Bei Dou with two cooked eggs. ‘This is for you to nourish your body.’

Bei Dou heard ‘nourish your body’ and understood Pei Jin was mocking him.

‘I heard last night you came home in the middle of night,’ Pei Jin said and winked at Bei Dou. ‘Where else did you go?’

Bei Dou refused to answer. He knew Pei Jin knew he was followed.

‘You don’t need to hide where you went,’ Pei Jin said. ‘You don’t need to look at me in that way. We’re both men, I understand. In the future if you want to go there then go. You don’t need to hide it from me. Even if you come back in the middle of the night, you don’t need to climb over the wall. You can walk through the front door and no one will dare to tease you.’

Bei Dou broke the bowl of cooked eggs.

‘Pei Jin, do you want to know what I discovered at Fu Qing?’ Bei Dou asked.

Pei Jin nodded his head. ‘But first tell me where you went. Which of Fu Qing’s entrances did you walk through? The right or left entrance? I made a bet with little lion. She said you’re a gentleman and would walk through the left entrance. I said that because you’re a gentleman you would walk through the right entrance. Were you a gentleman or not?’

Bei Dou broke the table. He didn’t expect a married pair like Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning were compatible to that extent and enjoyed mocking him.

‘Bei Dou, I was jesting,’ Pei Jin said. ‘You don’t need to be too serious.’

Bei Dou calmed himself then he recounted what happened at Fu Qing, but he didn’t expect Pei Jin would be surprised.

‘Does that mean you didn’t do anything last night?’ Pei Jin asked.
‘You’re still a pure man?’

Bei Dou heard ‘pure man’ and decided he would find a way to make Pei Jin suffer a little.

Pei Jin rubbed his chin. ‘It appears the brothels in Fu Qing aren’t simply brothels. I need to investigate who are involved in this scheme.’ He sighed. ‘Recently there’s been many situations I need to investigate.’

Pei Jin returned to his chamber. Before any investigations were resolved, a messenger delivered an invitation. On the sixth day of the tenth month was the crown prince and Yan Shi Ting’s wedding banquet.

Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning looked at each other in surprise. The empress had intentions for the crown prince to marry Yan Shi Ting early the following year. They didn’t know what happened for the sudden change in the wedding day... unless Yan Shi Ting’s body suddenly changed.

In the palace the maids and eunuchs quickly left the emperor’s chamber.

The emperor’s veins were visible on his face and neck while the empress and the crown prince knelt on the floor.

‘Good!’ the emperor praised. ‘You dare to do this! I underestimated you! Do you want me to lose all my dignity? You’re not married but you dare to get a lady pregnant!’

‘Emperor don’t be angry,’ the empress said. ‘It’s not unusual for a young man struggling to control their desires.’

‘Are all his maids dead?’ the emperor asked. ‘Why didn’t I see him losing his control with them? Hong Thi, don’t think I don’t know your motives. You don’t suit being the kingdom’s empress. What kind of mother would encourage this to happen?’

The empress’ face paled. ‘Emperor, I-’

‘Close your mouth!’ the emperor ordered and glared at the crown prince. ‘Why did I give birth to such a despicable son like you?’

‘Imperial father, I deserve to die,’ Pei Lam said.

The emperor knocked over a vase but it wasn’t enough to vent his anger.

‘While the stomach’s not showing,’ the emperor said. ‘Hurry and deal with the situation!’

The empress sighed in relief. She knew the emperor was angry but he would eventually relent.

In contrast Pei Lam smiled coldly. He knew there would be some things he couldn’t escape from.

The emperor didn’t want to see the empress and the crown prince any longer and dismissed them from his chamber.

After the emperor was alone in his chamber, he sighed and felt like some things were outside the control of his hand.

At the Yan Manor, Yan Shi Ting was rubbing her stomach anxiously.

‘Mother, this is too risky,’ Yan Shi Ting said. ‘Deceiving the emperor like this is a death penalty crime!’

Princess Kang Hua drank tea and spoke calmly. ‘You only need to know you don’t have one now but in the future you can have one.’

‘What if I’m not pregnant after I marry big brother crown prince?’ Yan Shi Ting asked.

Yan Shi Ting was intimate with the crown prince many times. But each time he asked her to drink the herbal remedy to prevent pregnancy.

Princess Kang Hua put the cup of tea down. ‘Your aunt said that if you can’t get pregnant then you can use another infant as a temporary substitute.’

‘What?’ Yan Shi Ting asked. ‘You want me to raise someone else’s child?’

Princess Kang Hua laughed coldly. ‘Of course not. No one else’s child would have a chance to become emperor. The infant is only a pawn. After you give birth to your own child, the pawn will disappear.’

Yan Shi Ting was frightened to hear her mother’s heartless tone. She felt uneasy about killing an innocent child.

‘Don’t ever forget,’ Princess Kang Hua said. ‘If you want to be empress, you need to be willing to do anything and sacrifice anything.’

Yan Shi Ting hesitated for a while but nodded her head to appease her mother.

Chapter 31

Pei Jin read a letter from Elder Ma in the calligraphy room.

Elder Ma’s messenger also sent Pei Jin dried fishes. In the letter Elder Ma wrote the dried fishs were raised by Pei Jin in Southern Jiang and they tasted delicious.

Pei Jin hid the letter. He knew it was Elder Ma’s code that Elder Ma received his letter about what happened in the palace.

Pei Jin thought whether it was a blessing or a curse to born into an imperial family where the father was suspicious of sons and the sons fought each other. Was he supposed to be defensive and protect his own family or did he need to take revenge to survive?

Later that morning Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning visited the palace for a family gathering.

Yan Shi Ning’s body wasn’t as sore as last night and she wore a light dress and it helped her walk easier.

Consort Mu was taking care of the injured seventh prince. So apart from Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning, only the emperor, the empress, the crown prince, Consort La and Pei Khan were at the family gathering.

Pei Khan wanted to run to Pei Jin but he was scared the emperor would scold him and stood next to Consort La.

‘If you want to go there then go,’ the emperor said to Pei Khan. ‘You don’t need to stand there and wrinkle a small face.’

Pei Khan didn’t understand what the emperor meant until Consort La explained to him then he ran to Pei Jin.

The empress watched Pei Jin carry Pei Khan in his arms and she smiled politely. ‘Indeed ninth prince and thirteenth prince are loving brothers.’

‘Are they not allowed to be?’ the emperor asked.

The empress closed her mouth and didn’t dare to criticize Pei Jin and Pei Khan anymore.

Consort La saw the tension between the emperor and empress and she wanted to ease their tension.

‘Yesterday I received the crown prince and Yan Shi Ting’s wedding invitation,’ Consort La said. ‘It’ll be a happy occasion.’

Pei Lam’s heart sank. He stared longingly at Yan Shi Ning but she was focused on playing with Pei Khan.

Pei Jin noticed the way the crown prince was staring at Yan Shi Ning and it confirmed his suspicions about the crown prince’s feelings toward Yan Shi Ning.

‘Consort La is right,’ Pei Jin said. ‘It’ll be a happy occasion. Congratulations tenth brother.’

Pei Lam knew the warning look in Pei Jin’s eyes didn’t match Pei Jin’s happy tone. He nodded his head and politely thanked Pei Jin.

The empress only regretted the crown prince didn't marry Yan Shi Ting earlier. After seventh prince saved the emperor, some of the crown prince's supporters became restless. The sooner the crown prince married Prime Minister Yan's youngest daughter the sooner she would be at ease that the emperor wouldn't give the crown prince's position to seventh prince.

The emperor drank tea slowly. In the past he didn't care the empress wanted the crown prince to marry Prime Minister Yan's youngest daughter who had a status that matched the crown prince. But after the assassination attempt, he didn't approve of Yan Shi Ting marrying the crown prince. That day Yan Shi Ting's first reaction was to hide behind the crown prince then Yan Shi Ting pulled her older sister in front of her to save herself. A woman who was scared of death wasn't suited to be the crown prince's wife.

The tension between the emperor and empress increased and it made everyone else around them uneasy too.

Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning exchanged a look, understood what each other's thoughts and they continued to play with Pei Khan.

Consort La broke the tensed silence. 'Their wedding day is an auspicious day.'

The emperor hid his frown behind the cup of tea. In the past he only thought Consort La was naive and kind but recently he thought her intelligence lessened by the day. He glanced at Pei Khan who only knew how to eat and play, sighed and put the cup down.

The empress' back stiffened. She lived with the emperor for many year and knew when he was in a bad mood. Regardless of the emperor's disapproval, she would ensure the crown prince married Yan Shi Ting on the sixth day of the ninth month.

Pei Lam drank tea and thought the tea tasted more bitter than usual.

After the family gathering ended the emperor, the crown prince and Pei Jin discussed imperial court matters while Consort La invited Yan Shi Ning to her chamber.

Yan Shi Ning did hesitate to accept Consort La's invitation because she knew Pei Jin didn't want her to be close to anyone else in the imperial family. But Pei Jin nodded his head to signal she could spend time with Pei Khan and Consort La.

The flowers were in full bloom along the garden path toward Consort La's chamber.

Pei Khan's feet were tired from walking too long. The nurse maid was about to pick him up but he pulled the sleeve of Yan Shi Ning's dress.

'Carry, carry,' Pei Khan said.

'Xiao Khan, don't trouble your ninth sister,' Consort La said.

'Mother, it's alright,' Yan Shi Ning said and carried Pei Khan in her arms.

Pei Khan wrapped an arm around Yan Shi Ning's neck and held a sweet bun with his free hand. He happily ate and wiped the crumbs stuck on his fingers onto Yan Shi Ning's neck.

Yan Shi Ning felt something sticky on her neck and realised it was Pei Khan's saliva and sweet bun crumbs. She glanced at Consort La who wasn't looking at them so she lightly hit Pei Khan's bottom.

Inside Consort La's chamber, Pei Khan sat on Yan Shi Ning's lap opposite Consort La.

'Shi Ning, thank you for saving Pei Khan's life,' Consort La said sincerely.

'Mother, you don't need to be courteous,' Yan Shi Ning said. 'Thirteenth prince is a good child.'

'Xiao Ning, you're a good person,' Consort La praised.

A maid entered the chamber and passed a small chest to Consort La.

Consort La opened the chest, picked up the butterfly hairpin decorated with gems and gave it to Yan Shi Ning.

'This hairpin is for you,' Consort La said.

'Mother, this is too valuable for me to accept,' Yan Shi Ning said.

'Take it,' Consort La said. 'This is only a hairpin. Xiao Khan's safety means more to me.'

Yan Shi Ning heard the sadness in Consort La's tone.

'I'm only six years older than you but my body can't cope much longer,' Consort La said.

'What?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'The makeup hides my body condition,' Consort La said. 'I was born with a weak body and after giving birth to Xiao Khan, my body became weaker. My family has no status and I have no friends in the palace. I'm worried about what's going to happen to Xiao Khan after I...'

Yan Shi Ning didn't know Consort La well. But she thought Consort La was a sincere person. Unlike other people, Consort La never arranged coincidental meetings with her or Pei Jin. Consort La only cared about Pei Khan's safety and didn't desire power.

'Shi Ning, forgive me for being bold,' Consort La said. 'I'm asking you as a mother... if something happens to me, I hope that you and ninth prince will protect Xiao Khan.'

Yan Shi Ning saw the desperation in Consort La's eyes. Consort La's sudden request shocked her and she didn't know how to react.

A while later Yan Shi Ning opened her mouth. 'Mother, don't talk about something bad. You need to take good care of yours and Pei Khan's health. No one can predict the future.'

Consort La was a little disappointed. She understood Yan Shi Ning didn't want to accept her request.

'You're right,' Consort La said. 'No one can predict the future. Forgive my boldness earlier.'

'Mother, it's nothing,' Yan Shi Ning said.

Afterward Consort La and Yan Shi Ning talked about less heavy matters and they played with Pei Khan until Pei Jin escorted Yan Shi Ning to the horse carriage.

Consort La watched Yan Shi Ning leave then she looked sadly at the butterfly hairpin Yan Shi Ning left on the table.

In the evening Yan Shi Ning laid next to Pei Jin on their bed and recounted her conversation with Consort La.

'You did well,' Pei Jin praised.

'In the future if something happens to Consort La, should we take care of Pei Khan or not?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'Wife, do you want to take care of Pei Khan or not?' Pei Jin asked.

'Pei Khan is pitiful,' Yan Shi Ning said.

'Then we'll take care of Pei Khan,' Pei Jin said and took off Yan Shi Ning's clothes.

'Pei Khan has a loveable face,' Yan Shi Ning said. 'If I was younger I would tease him... ah... that hurts... don't need to!'

Pei Jin bit Yan Shi Ning's breast. 'Of course we need to conceive a child together soon. How else can you have a child you can tease comfortably?'

Chapter 32

Widow Li carried a bowl of food and a bowl of medicine from the kitchen to a small chamber.

‘Older cousin, eat your meal,’ widow Li said.

‘Why are you feeding rubbish for someone ill to eat?’ old Li asked and knocked over the bowl of food.

Widow Li cried while she was kneeling and picking up the fallen food and broken bowl.

‘The cost of your medicine rose,’ widow Li said. ‘There is only a few silver taels left.’

‘Don’t you know how to demand more silver taels?’ old Li asked.

‘Princess Kang Hua said she’s not going to give me anymore silver taels,’ widow Li said.

Old Li threw a cup at widow Li’s head. ‘You have a hold of Princess Kang Hua’s tail but you’re scared of her. If you’re this dumb then die.’

Widow Li’s head hurt and more tears flowed down her face.

‘You only know how to cry!’ old Li said. ‘You won’t be satisfied until I die. In the past it was a waste to take care of you.’

‘It’s not like that,’ widow Li said.

‘If it’s not like that then hurry and go to the Yan Manor and demand more silver taels!’ old Li said. ‘You can threaten Princess Kang Hua that you’ll tell Prime Minister Yan and ninth prince’s wife if Princess Kang Hua doesn’t give you the silver taels. If I wasn’t bedridden I’ll go there myself. Go! Buy proper food on the way back... useless woman!’

Widow Li tidied the small chamber, changed into dry clothes and walked toward the Yan Manor.

Xiao Zai who Pei Jin asked to follow widow Li was hiding on the roof. Pei Jin instructed if he didn’t find out about widow Li’s situation then he

wasn't allowed to return to the manor. But he didn't expect to find out Princess Kang Hua had a secret she didn't want Yan Shi Ning to know. He was anticipating Pei Jin's praises and finally the other guards couldn't mock him anymore for his poor fighting skills.

Xiao Zai spat on old Li's head through a roof hole.

'Coward old man!' Xiao Zai cursed softly and rushed back to the manor.

On the way to the Yan Manor, widow Li was burdened with guilt and anxiety. She didn't like going to the Yan Manor to ask Princess Kang Hua for silver taels. She wished she never betrayed her conscience and never confided her secret to her older cousin.

Widow Li remembered her life with her older cousin far south from the imperial city. Although they worked hard to survive, he didn't verbally or physically abuse her. She thought perhaps it was her retribution. Every year on the anniversary of big sister Dung Thi's death, she would have nightmares and mumble in her sleep. Her cousin asked her why she had nightmares, she confessed what she did and everything changed for the worse.

Widow Li's older cousin dragged her to the imperial city, called her a dumb woman for being easily chased away by one thousand taels and intimidated her to go to the Yan Manor. She listened and asked for money for the first time in her life. Princess Kang Hua gave her another two thousand silver taels. Her older cousin spent all the two thousand silver taels on gambling and women at brothels.

The second time widow Li's older cousin told her to go ask for silver taels, Princess Kang Hua gave her another one thousand silver taels. But her older cousin also received retribution, he fell off a horse and his legs were crippled. She spent the one thousand silver taels to buy his medicine.

So that day it was the third time widow Li was forced to ask for money, she was truly scared what Princess Kang Hua would do to her. She

vowed it was going to be the last time she asked for money and her older cousin's health would be left up to his fate.

Half a shichen hour later widow Li left the Yan Manor with a paper note worth one thousand silver taels.

Inside the Yan Manor, Princess Kang Hua sat on a chair in her chamber and thought of a deadly plan to kill widow Li.

'Widow Li is more daring by the day,' old nurse maid said. 'She dared to threaten princess. Last time princess warned her it was the last time. Princess, you need to get rid of her.'

Princess Kang Hua hated throwing paper notes out the window, especially paper notes she saved for her elderly years.

'I know,' Princess Kang Hua. 'Go and send someone to eliminate her.'

Princess Kang Hua smiled coldly, soon there would be no one left to threaten her.

At Pei Jin's Manor, Xiao Zai reported widow Li's situation to Pei Jin.

'Are you certain you heard properly?' Pei Jin asked.

'Ninth prince, you know I'm not a good fighter but everything else about me is good,' Xiao Zai said. 'If I don't have good ears then you wouldn't have asked me to eavesdrop.'

Pei Jin laughed. 'Then why didn't you follow her to the Yan Manor to eavesdrop?'

Xiao Zai looked pitifully at Pei Jin. 'Ninth prince, I did want to follow her to the Yan Manor but the wall there is too high for me to climb. In the future I'll learn how to climb high walls.'

'Nonsense, hurry and go follow her,' Pei Jin said. 'But this time be careful.'

Xiao Zai left Bei Dou's chamber and Pei Jin's complexion darkened.

‘What secret do you think Princess Kang Hua is hiding from your wife?’ Bei Dou asked.

Pei Jin took a deep breath. ‘I fear the death of my wife’s mother wasn’t natural.’

Bei Dou was shocked speechless.

‘Princess Kang Hua isn’t someone who can easily be threatened,’ Pei Jin said. ‘To be safe I want you to send Xiao Hui to accompany Xiao Zai. Instruct Xiao Hui to protect widow Li and don’t let widow Li be assassinated. Also, you can’t tell my wife about this.’

Yan Shi Ning loved her mother, Pei Jin feared she would do something reckless if she found out.

That evening, west of Pei Jin’s manor, widow Li got out of bed and walked to the toilet hole outside.

‘Why is there only one person home?’ Xiao Hui asked. ‘Where’s widow Li?’

Xiao Hui rolled old Li’s body over. ‘Ah! Did I kill someone?’

‘Nonsense,’ Xiao Hui said.

Xiao Hui suspected Princess Kang Hua sent an assassin to kill widow Li.

In that moment widow Li walked back toward her chamber but she saw two dark figures who were standing in front of her older cousin’s bed. She didn’t see her older cousin move and was about to scream but one of dark figures covered her mouth.

Xiao Hui and Xiao Zai carried widow Li to an abandoned shelter nearby.

‘We’re not bad people,’ Xiao Zai said. ‘Right now our master is sleeping with our mistress. It’s safe for you to sleep here tonight, tomorrow you can see our master.’

‘Who is your master?’ widow Li asked.

‘You don’t need to worry,’ Xiao Hui said. ‘What you need to know you’ll know. What you don’t need to know even if you ask no one will tell you.’

Xiao Hui and Xiao Zai walked outside the shelter. Xiao Hui locked the door while Xiao Zai cried and held Xiao Hui’s arm.

‘Someone died... scary...’ Xiao Zai muttered.

Xiao Hui pulled his arm free. ‘You can die too.’

At Pei Jin’s Manor, Yan Shi Ning was dreaming. She dreamt her mother was hugging her and singing her a song. Suddenly her mother’s body began to bleed and her mother held her hand, ‘Shi Ning, you need to live a good life. I only want you to be safe. Don’t become like me...’

‘Mother... don’t go!’ Yan Shi Ning mumbled in her sleep. ‘Don’t leave me by myself...’

‘Shi Ning, Shi Ning!’ Pei Jin called.

Yan Shi Ning was startled awake, she opened her eyes and cried loudly. ‘Pei Jin, my mother...’

‘Don’t cry,’ Pei Jin said. ‘You have me.’

Yan Shi Ning hugged Pei Jin tightly. ‘Why did you go to Southern Jiang and didn’t come back to visit me... I was by myself...’

In Xuan Qing Yan Shi Ning didn’t have any friends because of hers and her mother’s status. Although Pei Jin bullied her, she knew that he cared about her and someone who would protect her. But when she needed him the most he disappeared to Southern Jiang.

‘In the future I won’t leave you by yourself again,’ Pei Jin promised.

Chapter 33

The following morning Xiao Hui and Xiao Zai returned to the manor.

Pei Jin was awoken by Xiao Hui and Xiao Zai's whistles outside the chamber.

Pei Jin got out of bed and reassured Yan Shi Ning. 'Wife, I'm going out for an inspection. After I come back we'll go to the Yan Manor to visit your father.'

Pei Jin kissed Yan Shi Ning, dressed and entered the horse carriage.

Inside the horse carriage Xiao Zai was eating a bowl of noodles while Xiao Hui glared at Xiao Zai.

'Ninth prince, have you eaten a morning meal?' Xiao Zai asked. 'Do you want to taste the noodles Xiao Hui cooked? It's delicious.'

'Do you think I'll let you eat my bowl of noodles if you didn't spit in it?' Xiao Hui asked.

Pei Jin patted Xiao Hui's shoulder. 'Xiao Hui, next time Xiao Zai spits, you can vomit and see if he'll dare to eat it.'

Xiao Zai smiled sweetly at Xiao Hui. 'Xiao Hui, I like your saliva.'

If Pei Jin wasn't a witness, Xiao Hui would have pushed Xiao Zai outside the horse carriage.

The horse carriage stopped in front of a locked shelter west of Pei Jin's manor.

Widow Li heard the door opened and turned her head to the door. Her eyes adjusted to the sunlight that shone into the dark room and she was shocked to see Pei Jin.

'Ninth prince,' widow Li said.

Pei Jin sat on the chair opposite widow Li and looked coldly at her. 'Widow Li, how did my wife's mother die?'

‘Ninth prince, it was Princess Kang Hua’s plan,’ widow Li said in a shaky voice.

‘Widow Li, you don’t need to be anxious,’ Pei Jin said. ‘Slowly explain everything.’

‘I was widowed before I was thirty years old,’ widow Li said. ‘Old nurse maid caught me in bed with her son-in-law and wanted to report me to the magistrate. I begged old nurse maid not to report me and promised her I would willingly be a work horse if she forgives my offence. Old nurse maid agreed on the condition I go to Xuan Qing and spy on big sister Dung Thi... old nurse maid setup coincidental meetings between me and big sister Dung Thi and that’s how I became big sister Dung Thi and your wife’s maid.’

Widow Li cried tears of guilt while she confessed. ‘If Yan Jing sent letters to big sister Dung Thi, old nurse maid ordered me to intercept the letters and send them back to Yan Jing. For two years I listened to old nurse maid’s orders because aside from sending back letters, I didn’t have to do anything that would hurt big sister Dung Thi or your wife... Dung Thi was good to me and treated me like a blood sister. Your wife was a mischievous little girl, but she was filial and treated me like her aunt.’

Widow Li clasped her hands tightly. ‘But three years ago after I sent back one of Yan Jing’s many letters... Princess Kang Hua delivered me a bottle of herbs and a letter. She ordered me to put some herbs into big sister Dung Thi’s bowl of soup each day... I didn’t know what the herbs were but I suspected it was poison. I followed Princess Kang Hua’s order and big sister Dung Thi was slowly poisoned... after a year the bottle of herbs was empty and big sister Dung Thi returned to the heavens.’

Pei Jin fisted his hands while he listened to widow Li’s confession. ‘Widow Li, what was in the letter that Yan Jing sent to my wife’s mother?’

Widow Li pulled out an old letter she carried around in her pouch and passed it to Pei Jin.

Pei Jin read the old letter, 'Dung Dung, looking at the past I can only see my heavy conscience. Today I feel like I have received my retribution for abandoning you to take responsibility of a child I thought was mine. I don't dare to hope you'll forgive me. I only want you to return to me so I can compensate you for the rest of my life.'

Pei Jin was shocked, Yan Jing doubted Yan Shi Ting was his blood daughter.

Pei Jin regained his composure and spoke coldly. 'Widow Li, if you're holding onto this old letter then perhaps you're holding onto another old letter.'

Widow Li's shaky hands pulled out Princess Kang Hua's letter about the bottle of herbs out of her pouch and passed it to Pei Jin.

Pei Jin laughed coldly. 'Widow Li, you thought of a way to protect yourself long ago. Did you keep these old letters to prove your innocence or to extort money from Princess Kang Hua?'

Widow Li nodded her head. At first she kept the letters because she was scared old nurse maid and Princess Kang Hua would report her to the magistrate for adultery and murder. She didn't expect Princess Kang Hua would send someone to kill her.

'Did Princess Kang Hua send someone to kill me and my older cousin?' widow Li asked.

Pei Jin put the letters in his inner robes. 'Widow Li, if it wasn't Princess Kang Hua then who else would waste their energy to send someone to kill you?'

'Your wife... does she know...' widow Li asked.

'Do you want my wife to know?' Pei Jin asked.

Widow Li shook her head.

Pei Jin left the shelter and returned to the manor.

Yan Shi Ning was waiting anxiously in the chamber for a long time and she was relieved Pei Jin finally returned.

‘Where did you go?’ Yan Shi Ning asked. ‘It’s the middle of the afternoon!’

Pei Jin smiled and passed Yan Shi Ning a stick of dried dates. ‘I went to buy dried dates for you.’

Yan Shi Ning scoffed and accepted the dried dates.

Later that afternoon Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning ate an afternoon meal with Yan Jing and Yan Shi Ting, but Princess Kang Hua was absent. After the afternoon meal Yan Jing pulled Pei Jin to the calligraphy room and Yan Shi Ting pulled Yan Shi Ning to a chamber because Yan Shi Ting wanted to boast about the wedding dress.

Yan Shi Ting came out from behind a screen, raised her chin and showed her wedding dress to Yan Shi Ning.

‘Is my wedding dress beautiful?’ Yan Shi Ting asked.

‘Beautiful, little sister will be a beautiful bride,’ Yan Shi Ning praised.

‘Do you want to see me wear it?’ Yan Shi Ting asked.

Yan Shi Ning nodded her head.

Yan Shi Ting walked behind the screen. Yan Shi Ning signalled a maid to leave and Yan Shi Ning followed Yan Shi Ting.

Yan Shi Ning was curious what a pregnant Yan Shi Ting would look like, because Yan Shi Ting didn’t behave like an expectant mother. Behind the screen Yan Shi Ting’s back faced her and Yan Shi Ting was wearing white undergarments. There was nothing unusual about the white undergarments except the blood specks on Yan Shi Ting’s bottom.

Yan Shi Ting turned her head around. 'Big sister, why are you here?'

Yan Shi Ning hid her suspicions and smiled at Yan Shi Ting. 'Little sister is about to be married off. Of course your big sister wants to help you put on your wedding dress.'

Yan Shi Ning glanced at the blood specks beneath Yan Shi Ting's flat stomach and immediately she wanted to go and find Pei Jin. When she and Pei Jin received the crown prince and Yan Shi Ting's wedding invitation they thought that Yan Shi Ting was pregnant so Pei Jin sent a guard to investigate. The guard reported that the empress and the crown prince told the emperor about Yan Shi Ting's pregnancy.

Yan Shi Ning helped Yan Shi Ting put on the wedding dress faster than she wore a dress. Then she ran to Pei Jin and dragged him to her old chamber.

'Wife, why are you amused?' Pei Jin asked.

'I discovered a secret,' Yan Shi Ning said.

Pei Jin listened to Yan Shi Ning's discovery. Afterward he glanced in four directions and whispered in her ear. 'Wife, should we tell imperial father?'

'Pei Jin, I can't do something despicable like that,' Yan Shi Ning said.

'Did you forget she did something despicable toward you on the night of the harvest festival?' Pei Jin said.

Yan Shi Ning remembered how she nearly died that day and her back turned cold.

Pei Jin hugged Yan Shi Ning and he looked out the window. His eyes turned cold the moment he saw Princess Kang Hua in the gardens.

In the gardens Princess Kang Hua was panicking. She received news that an old man and an assassin's dead bodies were found west of the imperial city. But no one heard news about widow Li. She knew that

widow Li couldn't have killed the assassin she sent and suspected that someone was protecting widow Li. Before she could find out where widow Li was, a young beggar came to the Yan Manor. The young beggar showed her two letters and demanded one thousand silver taels... the calligraphy of the two letters were identical to hers and Yan Jing's calligraphy. It meant the person who was protecting widow Li knew her biggest secrets about Dung Thi and Yan Shi Ting.

Princess Kang Hua was too anxious to notice Pei Jin was smiling coldly above the gardens.

Chapter 34

'Widow Li sent me to receive one thousand silver taels,' the young beggar said.

Princess Kang Hua's eyes were on the verge of falling out. For the last few days a different young beggar delivered copies of the same two letters and demanded one thousand taels each morning. Each morning she was furious, anxious and helpless. She sent a servant to follow the young beggars but the servant would always report the same bad news, the young beggars would disappear amongst the crowded imperial city.

Princess Kang Hua's fears ate her silver taels and her health, she fell ill.

Yan Shi Ting didn't understand why her mother who was always healthy was suddenly ill.

That day the owner of Lady Su's dressmaker's shop, Gentleman Su visited the Yan Manor and showed Yan Shi Ting new fabrics and dress samples.

'Lady Yan, I personally came here to show you the new fabrics that ninth prince's wife doesn't own,' Gentleman Su said.

Yan Shi Ting knew Gentleman Su wanted to gain her favor. She was frustrated to death that Gentleman Su used to show the worthless Yan

Shi Ning new fabrics and dresses before her. She was going to be the crown prince's wife, how could she lose to Yan Shi Ning who was married to an unfavored prince?

'I'll buy all the new fabrics you brought here this morning,' Yan Shi Ting said. 'Wait here, I'll go get a paper note to pay you.'

Yan Shi Ting walked to her mother's room and asked her mother for one thousand silver taels.

'Shi Ting, you have enough dresses for you to wear after your wedding,' Princess Kang Hua said. 'Why do you need to buy more new fabrics?'

'Mother, I love the new fabrics,' Yan Shi Ting sulked.

Princess Kang Hua lost most of her silver taels but she couldn't tell her daughter the truth. 'Shi Ting, be reasonable!'

Yan Shi Ting was used to getting everything she wanted so her mother's refusal hurt her ears. 'Mother, it's only fabrics. Why did you say I'm being unreasonable? These past few days you have been acting strange. Last time the owner of the jade shop visited, you said I could buy as many jade bracelets that I wanted. Mother, if you're not going to let me spend the silver taels then who are you saving the silver taels for?'

Princess Kang Hua slapped her daughter's cheek. 'Shi Ting, close your mouth!'

Yan Shi Ting touched her sore cheek and cried, no one had ever hit her before.

'Mother, you hit me!' Yan Shi Ting shrieked and ran out of her mother's chamber.

'Princess, what happened?' old nursemaid asked. 'Why did you hit second mistress?'

'What do I do now?' Princess Kang Hua asked.

'Princess, wake up,' old nursemaid said. 'You can't fall like this.'

‘That’s right,’ Princess Kang Hua muttered. ‘I can’t fall like this... I didn’t do anything wrong! It’s all their fault! Why should I be scared of them?’

‘Princess, that’s right,’ old nursemaid said. ‘You shouldn’t be scared of them.’

Princess Kang Hua felt her usual cold arrogance returned.

Gentleman Su acted disappointed Yan Shi Ting changed her mind and didn’t want to buy the new fabrics. But on the way to Pei Jin’s manor, his grin was wider than the new fabrics next to him.

At Pei Jin’s manor, Gentleman Su discussed Princess Kang Hua’s situation with Pei Jin and Bei Dou.

‘It appears Princess Kang Hua is a pauper,’ Gentleman Su said. ‘She’s paranoid and in a depressed state. Earlier I saw Lady Yan ran out of Princess Kang Hua’s chamber crying. Xiao Jin, indeed you know how to use another person’s dagger to slowly cut flesh off.’

‘I didn’t do anything,’ Pei Jin said innocently.

Gentleman Su laughed. ‘You’re right. You didn’t do anything. You only found some young beggars to do it for you. Today one of the young beggars asked me why I didn’t ask them to do it three times a day. Morning, afternoon and evening instead of once a day.’

‘Once a day is enough,’ Pei Jin said. ‘Anymore I fear Princess Kang Hua can’t cope. I need her alive for the crown prince and Yan Shi Ting’s wedding day. It’s more amusing to see her slowly rot.’

‘Luckily I haven’t done anything to offend you,’ Gentleman Su said. ‘Otherwise I wouldn’t know I was dying slowly.’

‘Of course you have offended me,’ Pei Jin said. ‘Each time you send a new dress here, you raise the price.’

‘What offence?’ Gentleman Su asked. ‘My money is your money. Think of it as me helping invest your money. Look at the profits I’ve given you all these years. But you haven’t even thanked me once. Of course after you succeed, remember to let me become the treasurer. At that time it doesn’t matter how much money is in the palace, I’m certain I’ll help you double it.’

Pei Jin laughed. ‘Do you think it’s easy to be a treasurer?’

‘How hard can it be?’ Gentleman Su asked. ‘I think you’re father-in-law does have brain. What do you want me to do next? Do you want me to send gifts to the Yan Manor?’

‘For now let my father-in-law find out on his own,’ Pei Jin said.

‘I understand,’ Gentleman Su said. ‘I’ll choose a good day to show the accounting books of dresses, shoes and jewellery Lady Yan bought. It’s a large sum, Yan Jing wouldn’t have that many silver taels. He’ll ask me to look for Princess Kang Hua... she’ll ask me to look for Yan Jing and he’ll wonder why she’s a pauper. What about Lady Yan’s fake pregnancy?’

‘I want Yan Shi Ting’s pregnancy to be exposed in front of imperial father,’ Pei Jin said. ‘So I need to wait until the crown prince and Yan Shi Ting’s wedding day. But I haven’t thought of a way to expose her without leaving a trace.’

‘You can borrow someone else’s dagger,’ Bei Dou said.

‘Whose dagger?’ Pei Jin asked.

‘Xiao Dou is right,’ Gentleman Su said. ‘How can this news spread to seventh prince?’

One of Pei Jin’s guards, Xiao Ping entered Bei Dou’s chamber.

‘Ninth prince, I found out who owns Fu Qing,’ Xiao Ping said.

‘Who?’ Bei Dou asked.

‘Seventh prince,’ Xiao Ping said.

Pei Jin smiled and looked at Bei Dou. 'Bei Dou, it appears tonight you'll need to climb walls.'

Bei Dou's goose bumps warned him that he would also be taking three warm baths that night.

Yan Shi Ning didn't ask what Pei Jin did during the day. All she knew was the MF Pei Jin ate her in bed from night to dawn. Each morning she would wake up with a sore waist, back, neck and thighs. After a few nights rolling on the bed with him, she began to adjust to the different positions. But she hadn't adjusted to waking up late in the mornings, neither did her temper. Because she overheard a new rumor spread throughout the imperial city, gentle ninth prince's wife loves to sleep and doesn't wake up until midday.

Yan Shi Ning thought her gentle lady image was ruined. How could a gentle lady wake up at midday? So that night she carried a blanket and pillow to sleep in a different chamber. But the following morning she woke up and saw the MF Pei Jin laid next to her. Afterward he ate her until midday.

Finally Yan Shi Ning couldn't hold back her temper and gave Pei Jin three conditions if he wanted to sleep with her.

'Only once a day?' Pei Jin asked.

'Yes,' Yan Shi Ning said.

'Each time no longer than half a shichen hour?' Pei Jin asked.

'Yes,' Yan Shi Ning said.

Pei Jin held Yan Shi Ning's shoulders and shook her body. 'Wife, wake up. Don't dream anymore.'

Yan Shi Ning felt pitiful, day or night there were red kiss marks all over her body.

Pei Jin pulled the blanket over his and Yan Shi Ning's naked bodies. He watched her fall asleep. He knew she wanted a carefree life so he wanted to give her a carefree life. He was willing to silently help her chase away her shadows.

Chapter 35

The heavens didn't grant Pei Jin's wish.

That day Pei Jin and Bei Dou were out buying medicine while Yan Shi Ning stayed at the manor watching young maids play in the gardens. She wanted to join them, but gentle ninth prince's wife needed to be dignified. Also, her dresses felt a little tighter than usual. She remembered last night when she was bathing, her breasts looked a little bigger too.

'Mistress, thirteenth prince is here,' a servant announced.

Yan Shi Ning wondered if Pei Khan came to visit because a while ago she pinched his cheeks in the palace and said that when he was free, he could visit her and Pei Jin.

Pei Khan never left the palace since he was born. After he heard ninth sister said he could visit her and ninth brother, he was deeply moved.

Consort La thought Pei Khan's request to visit Yan Shi Ning and Pei Jin was a good opportunity for Pei Khan to bond with Yan Shi Ning. She waited for ninth prince to recover then she asked the emperor's permission to let Pei Khan visit Pei Jin's manor.

The emperor consented and sent imperial guards with Pei Khan to Pei Jin's manor.

The moment Pei Khan saw Yan Shi Ning, he jumped into her arms and looked around for Pei Jin.

'Nin, Nin?' Pei Khan asked.

Yan Shi Ning carried Pei Khan to the gardens closer to her chamber.

‘Your ninth brother is out,’ Yan Shi Ning said. She signalled a maid.
‘Bring buns and sweets for thirteenth prince.’

Pei Khan was a little disappointed Pei Jin was out, but he was happy he could to play with Yan Shi Ning.

Yan Shi Ning thought about what she could play with Pei Khan and remembered the cuju ball Pei Jin brought home a while ago. ‘Thirteenth brother, let’s play cuju.’

In the past Yan Shi Ning loved to play cuju in Xuan Qing. She put Pei Khan on the ground and ran to get the cuju ball from the chamber.

Pei Khan happily played with the cuju ball. If he kicked too far, his short legs would run little steps after the cuju ball.

Yan Shi Ning, the maids, the servants and the imperial guards smiled and watched Pei Khan chased the ball. Pei Khan’s expression was serious and he didn’t allow anyone to retrieve the cuju ball for him.

Pei Khan kicked the cuju further after each kick. But after his strongest kick the cuju ball flew and landed in the well.

Yan Shi Ning saw Pei Khan’s sad round eyes and consoled him.
‘Thirteenth brother, I’ll make you a new cuju ball to play with.’

Pei Khan nodded his head. Yan Shi Ning knew it would take too long to make a cuju ball from fabrics and decided it was quicker to use paper. She picked up Pei Khan and carried him to Pei Jin’s calligraphy room.

Inside Pei Jin’s calligraphy room, Yan Shi Ning and Pei Khan collected torn paper on the floor and on the table. Then she showed Pei Khan how to flatten the torn paper and scrunched it into small paper balls.

Pei Khan thought it was too easy and quickly made a pile of small paper balls.

Suddenly Yan Shi Ning glanced at one of the torn paper she picked up... Yan Jing. She read it carefully and the torn paper slipped out of her hands in her shocked state.

Pei Jin returned to the manor and heard Pei Khan came to visit and was inside the calligraphy room with Yan Shi Ning.

Pei Jin entered the calligraphy room and saw Pei Khan was sitting on the floor happily making small paper balls. But Yan Shi Ning sat on a chair in front of the table and she had the look of despair on her face. He glanced at the torn paper on the table and realised he forgot to burn the last copy of the letters.

Pei Jin carried Pei Khan to Bei Dou's chamber and asked Bei Dou to play with Pei Khan for a while. Then he rushed back to the calligraphy room and sat next to Yan Shi Ning.

'Pei Jin...' Yan Shi Ning said.

Pei Jin hugged Yan Shi Ning. 'Shi Ning, let me explain.'

Yan Shi Ning pushed Pei Jin away. 'Why do you need to copy my father and Princess Kang Hua's calligraphy? Why?'

Pei Jin didn't know what to say.

'What did she put in my mother's bowl of soup?' Yan Shi Ning asked. She looked down at the torn paper on the table that was wet from her tears. 'Pei Jin, why didn't you tell me?'

Yan Shi Ning avoided Pei Jin's touch. 'Pei Jin, you knew everything that happened but you didn't tell me anything! Why? Tell me, what did she put in my mother's bowl of soup?'

Pei Jin's heart ached to see Yan Shi Ning cry. 'Poison herbs.'

Yan Shi Ning remembered that year her mother's health slowly declined... until her mother died. 'Mother...'

Pei Jin hugged Yan Shi Ning, her body was shaking and she sobbed loudly. 'Shi Ning, calm down.'

Yan Shi Ning wrapped her arms around Pei Jin's shoulders and sobbed on his neck. 'Why did she need to kill my mother? Why? My mother didn't do anything to her. My mother never fought with her. Why did she still want to kill my mother? Pei Jin, I want to kill her!'

Pei Jin heard Yan Shi Ning sob until her voice became hoarse. He didn't want her to lose her voice and reluctantly struck her unconscious.

Yan Shi Ning dreamt her father and Princess Kang Hua killed her mother. She was tied to a chair and couldn't save her mother. 'Mother... mother...'

Yan Shi Ning was startled awake. She opened her eyes and saw Pei Jin was lying next to her in bed but she didn't know what time it was.

'Shi Ning, what's wrong?'

'Pei Jin, I want to kill her!' Yan Shi Ning said. 'I want them to die suffering!'

'I'll help you avenge your mother's death,' Pei Jin promised.

Yan Shi Ning knew Pei Jin would keep his promise and she sobbed loudly for her lost mother.

After Yan Shi Ning tired herself to sleep from sobbing, Pei Jin returned to Bei Dou's chamber. Pei Jin hugged Bei Dou then the imperial guards escorted Bei Dou back to the palace.

'What happened?' Bei Dou asked.

'My wife knows,' Pei Jin said.

'That's good,' Bei Dou said.

Pei Jin frowned. 'Why do I feel you're too happy about it?'

'If your wife becomes stronger, it's good for you,' Bei Dou said.

Pei Jin felt he failed to protect her.

'Your wife is naturally a strong person,' Bei Dou said. 'But you're too protective of her.'

Pei Jin sighed. 'You're right, my wife is a strong person. She's stronger and is more vengeful than I thought.'

'Of course a little lion has different blood to an ordinary person,' Bei Dou said.

Pei Jin turned the jade ring around his finger for a while.

Pei Jin remembered a lost memory. He remembered a drunkard was about to assault Yan Shi Ning's mother but Yan Shi Ning pulled out a knife and scared the drunkard away.

'Your wife knows everything?' Bei Dou asked.

'Not yet,' Pei Jin said. 'She's in a turmoil state and can't process too many thoughts. But I think she'll recover too quickly and force me to tell her everything.'

Pei Jin didn't want to tell Yan Shi Ning that Princess Kang Hua not only killed her mother, but Princess Kang Hua wanted to kill her too.

'I don't know how my wife wants to avenge her mother's death,' Pei Jin said. 'But I know anyone who dares harm her or someone she loves, she would make that person suffer a hundred times more than she suffered.'

'You and your wife are even more compatible than I thought,' Bei Dou said.

The following day, Yan Shi Ning quietly sat on a chair and thought for the whole day.

Pei Jin's biggest fear was hatred consuming Yan Shi Ning's head.

Pei Jin wasn't going to let his biggest fear become real. He knelt in front of Yan Shi Ning, propped his chin between her closed knees and looked up pitifully at her. 'Wife, I'm lonely because you neglected me for the whole day.'

Yan Shi Ning looked at Pei Jin's pitiful face and her pursed lips relaxed. She knew he was worried about her and wanted to make her laugh. It lessened the cold sensation in her heart.

'Wife, your husband is a gentleman,' Pei Jin said pitifully. 'Why do you want to neglect me?'

Yan Shi Ning stroked Pei Jin's ears, held his face and kissed his lips.

Pei Jin felt Yan Shi Ning's kiss was filled with gratefulness and light after a dark night.

The maids and servants quickly left the chamber and closed the door.

'Pei Jin,' Yan Shi Ning said.

'Um?' Pei Jin asked.

'Do you want me?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

Pei Jin understood and carried Yan Shi Ning to their bed.

Chapter 36

Yan Shi Ning undressed Pei Jin and herself then she pushed him onto the bed. She straddled his legs, his hands cupped her breasts and she mounted him.

Pei Jin kissed Yan Shi Ning's pursed lips and their tongues swirled together. He knew she hated pain, usually he would wait until she was wet between her thighs before joining their bodies. Her initiating their lovemaking flamed his desire and pierced his heart, he knew she was counteracting her mental pain with physical pain.

Yan Shi Ning pressed her palms on Pei Jin's chest and sat still above him. He was deep inside her and the pain helped numb the pain in her heart. He caressed her lower back and kissed the tears on her face. His tenderness made her forget pain and she began to ride him. Each time she raised and lowered her body, he penetrated her deeper.

A long time later Yan Shi Ning's body spasmed, Pei Jin's body climaxed and spurted semen inside her.

The following morning Pei Jin woke up and was happy there was no distant look in Yan Shi Ning's eyes but she was staring intensely at the ceiling.

Pei Jin rolled over and rubbed himself between Yan Shi Ning's thighs. 'Wife, last night you were so strong. This morning my waist and back hurts. But... it was pleasurable. Wife, do you want me again?'

Yan Shi Ning heard Pei Jin's teasing words and she blushed.

'Pei Jin, are you hiding anything else from me?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

Pei Jin reluctantly rolled off Yan Shi Ning's body and explained everything to Yan Shi Ning.

Yan Shi Ning's body turned cold after she heard Princess Kang Hua wanted to kill her too.

'So you didn't eat me on our wedding night because I was poisoned?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'My wife is more intelligent than I thought,' Pei Jin teased.

Yan Shi Ning kicked Pei Jin's leg and berated herself for wasting energy by thinking he was a gentleman who truly wanted to wait until she was willing.

Pei Jin caught Yan Shi Ning's leg and wrapped it around his waist. 'Wife, let's talk about something more primitive.'

Yan Shi Ning bit Pei Jin's arm and vented a little of her anger.

Pei Jin rubbed his pitiful arm. 'Wife, what plan did you think of?'

Yan Shi Ning didn't believe Pei Jin didn't act out a plan of his own after he knew her mother was killed. 'Pei Jin, you can tell me what you've done first.'

Pei Jin confessed about how he had been slowly making Princess Kang Hua suffer.

'You're too soft on her,' Yan Shi Ning said. 'I want her to suffer more.'

'Wife, what do you want to do?' Pei Jin asked.

'She wants her daughter to be the crown prince's wife,' Yan Shi Ning said. 'I don't want her wish to be granted. I want Yan Shi Ting's fake pregnancy exposed on her wedding day and I want all of them to die suffering.'

'Wife, we shared the same thoughts,' Pei Jin said. 'I've sent Bei Dou to spread the news at Fu Qing. I forgot to tell you, the owner of Fu Qing is seventh brother.'

'Seventh prince?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'Um,' Pei Jin said. 'In the past I wondered how seventh brother gained many supporters. Now I know he used his supporters' secrets to blackmail them.'

'Is that why you plan to borrow his dagger?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'The crown prince marrying Yan Shi Ting isn't a serious threat to seventh brother,' Pei Jin said. 'But after seventh brother knows the truth, he won't resist to damage the crown prince's credibility in front of imperial father. I know seventh brother will wait until the wedding to expose Yan Shi Ting's deceit. Then seventh brother will think he's the biggest winner after the Yan Manor, the empress and the crown prince's reputations are ruined.'

'Doesn't it mean we're helping seventh prince?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

‘It doesn’t have to mean we’re helping seventh brother,’ Pei Jin said.

‘Pei Jin, do you want to become the emperor?’ Yan Shi Ning asked.

Yan Shi Ning thought that Pei Jin was most suited to be the emperor compared to his brothers.

Pei Jin saw Yan Shi Ning was truly curious and he whispered something in her ear.

Yan Shi Ning heard what Pei Jin whispered and she smiled.

‘You want to take revenge on the empress and I want to take revenge on Princess Kang Hua,’ Yan Shi Ning said. ‘This way they’ll both pay with their blood and lives.’

‘What about Yan Jing?’ Pei Jin asked.

‘He’s my father,’ Yan Shi Ning said. ‘But his ambition is the reason why my mother was killed. I don’t need him to die. It’s enough that he loses his position in the imperial court.’

Pei Jin nodded his head. He couldn’t predict what his father would do to Yan Jing. But if his father wanted to execute Yan Jing then he would make a little plea to save Yan Jing’s life, because he and Yan Shi Ning knew in Yan Jing’s eyes being demoted was worse than dying.

‘Wife, why do you think Yan Jing suspects Yan Shi Ting isn’t his blood daughter?’ Pei Jin asked. ‘Why hasn’t he done anything to investigate the situation all these years? He’s not someone who would spare a person for deceiving him. I’ve sent someone to investigate Yan Shi Ting’s birth, but I haven’t received any evidence.’

‘Perhaps he’s either misunderstood or is certain Yan Shi Ting isn’t his daughter,’ Yan Shi Ning said. ‘It’s possible Princess Kang Hua convinced him that he has no evidence to confirm his suspicions. But you said that Princess Kang Hua panicked after she received copies of

those two letters. So I think Yan Shi Ting isn't my father's blood daughter.'

'Pei Jin, I want you to give me one of those letters,' Yan Shi Ning said. 'I want to show it my father. I want to see what his reaction is when he knows the daughter he loved since she was born isn't his blood daughter.'

'Yan-Shi-Ning!' Pei Jin cried out. 'Give back my loveable lively little lion!'

Yan Shi Ning smiled at Pei Jin. 'Pei Jin, don't worry. I'm still me, I won't change.'

At the Yan Manor, Yan Jing thought that recently nothing had been smooth for him. He was ashamed of his youngest daughter's behaviour before her wedding, it caused him to lose the emperor's favor. Princess Kang Hua's health was suddenly poor and Gentleman Su asked him to pay for the costs of Yan Shi Ting's dresses and shoes.

Yan Jing did want to pay Gentleman Su, but the total cost shook his body and he asked Gentleman Su to receive the silver taels from Princess Kang Hua.

'Prime Minister Yan, I did ask Princess Kang Hua,' Gentleman Su said. 'But she said she was unwell and asked me to come back another day. Honestly, I need the money to pay my merchants and dressmakers.'

Yan Jing tactfully asked Gentleman Su to come back another day then he looked for Princess Kang Hua in the Yan Manor. He didn't know how many silver taels Princess Kang Hua possessed and he had never asked. But he knew she wasn't a pauper so he couldn't understand why she couldn't pay Gentleman Su.

Yan Jing found Princess Kang Hua in her chamber and he asked her about the silver taels owed to Gentleman Su.

'My silver taels has no relation to you,' Princess Kang Hua said coldly.

Yan Jing thought Princess Kang Hua's cold arrogance was too much. He suppressed his disdain and retreated toward the calligraphy room.

On the way to the calligraphy room Yan Jing was surprised to see his oldest daughter arrived at the Yan Manor to visit him.

'Shi Ning?' Yan Jing asked.

Yan Shi Ning smiled charmingly at Yan Jing. 'Father, I came to give Shi Ting a pair of jade bracelets. It'll look beautiful on her wrists.'

Yan Jing was proud of his oldest daughter who was gentle and considerate. 'Shi Ning, you're a good person.'

Yan Jing accepted the jade bracelets and he noticed Yan Shi Ning hesitated to ask him something. 'Shi Ning, is something wrong?'

Yan Shi Ning bit her lower lip and spoke in a shaky voice. 'Father... I... this... I didn't intend to tell father about this. But forgive me father, I can't hide this from you.'

Yan Jing had never seen Yan Shi Ning looked so sad and anxious like she did that she did that day. 'Shi Ning, if anything bad happened you can tell me and I promise I'll give you justice.'

Yan Shi Ning's heart laughed coldly. She pulled out a letter and passed it to Yan Jing. 'Father, last night someone delivered this to my husband's manor. After I read it I was shocked and I wanted to ask father about this.'

Yan Jing read the letter and his body stiffened, it was clearly the letter he wrote to Dung Thi... it was his calligraphy and the same paper he used that year.

Chapter 37

After Yan Shi Ning left, Yan Jing paced the calligraphy room.

A while later, Yan Shi Ting's frown changed into a smile and she wanted to fly. She acted reluctant to receive the pair of jade bracelets from Yan Shi Ning, but she loved the jade bracelets.

Yan Jing strode into Yan Shi Ting's chamber while she was admiring the jade bracelets.

Yan Shi Ting looked up at her father who appeared upset about something. 'Father, what's wrong?'

Yan Jing sat beside Yan Shi Ting. A maid was about to pour tea for him but he stopped the maid.

'Pour me a bowl of water,' Yan Jing said.

'Father, why do you want to drink water?' Yan Shi Ting asked. 'This is rare tea, the empress gave it to me.'

Yan Jing held Yan Shi Ting's hand and smiled at her while the maid poured water.

'Shi Ting, you're an adult now and about to be start your own family,' Yan Jing said.

Suddenly Yan Shi Ting felt a sharp pain on her finger and retrieved her hand.

'Father, what happened?' Yan Shi Ting asked.

Yan Jing was satisfied a drop of blood fell into the bowl of water.

'Nothing. I think this bowl is dirty. I'm going to exchange it for a clean bowl.'

Yan Jing didn't wait for Yan Shi Ting's reply, he carried the bowl of water outside.

In the courtyard Yan Jing pricked his finger and a drop of blood fell into the bowl of water. Indeed his blood and Yan Shi Ting's blood didn't merge and he flung the bowl of water onto the ground.

Yan Shi Ting was startled by the strange sounds of a broken bowl.

Yan Jing didn't know how he left Yan Shi Ting's courtyard. His legs felt heavy, his whole body felt cold and his hands were shaky. Princess Kang Hua deceived him for more than sixteen years!

Yan Jing remembered that year Yan Shi Ting was born.

'Little sister Hua, is Shi Ting my blood daughter?' Yan Jing asked. 'Say it clearly!'

'Big brother, what else do you want?' Princess Kang Hua asked. 'Aren't you wearing the headgear you wanted? If you don't believe me then I'll die for you to see. How can you suspect I would deceive you about this? Look at Shi Ting, doesn't she look like you? Look, her blood and your blood merged. What else do you want?'

Yan Jing's heart was teared to pieces. He was a prime minister of a kingdom but his second wife and her daughter deceived him for more than sixteen years! He wore a headgear of a fool for more than sixteen years! Indeed it was a laughable situation.

A while later Yan Jing kicked down Princess Kang Hua's door.

'Everyone leave!' Yan Jing ordered the frightened maids and servants while he looked coldly at Princess Kang Hua.

Princess Kang Hua was married to Yan Jing for many years. She knew if he was angry and didn't want anyone to hear what he wanted to say to her then it was something shameful... her face whitened, perhaps Yan Jing received those two letters.

'Everyone hurry and go outside!' Princess Kang Hua ordered the maids and servants that were stalling inside the chamber.

After the maids and servants left, the atmosphere in the chamber was tensed and silent.

Princess Kang Hua refused to open her mouth first. She didn't want to confess anything she wasn't forced to.

Yan Jing was repulsed by Princess Kang Hua's beautiful face. 'Kang Hua, I haven't mistreated you. Why did you deceive me to this extent?'

'I... I... what did I lie to you about?' Princess Kang Hua denied.

Yan Jing heard Princess Kang Hua's lie and his head ached. 'You still want to deceive me? Say it clearly, is Yan Shi Ting yours and your older cousin's daughter? No, she isn't a Yan! That bastard child doesn't suit to be a Yan!'

Princess Kang Hua felt like there were coffins in all four directions. Indeed paper couldn't defeat fire and her deceit was exposed.

'You don't need to deceive me anymore!' Yan Jing said. 'I know everything! Earlier I tested that bastard child's blood and my blood. You can't deceive me anymore. Kang Hua, I truly want to kill you. Because of you, I left my wife and daughter. But you treated me like a fool. You're scum! Scum!'

Yan Jing swore and cried for a long time. Indeed he was an unpleasant sight.

Princess Kang Hua dug her fingernails into her palms and she looked at the angry man in front of her. Suddenly everything ended. The days and years of anxiety finally ended.

Princess Kang Hua straightened her back and looked coldly at Yan Jing. 'What can you do?'

Princess Kang Hua realised it no longer mattered that Yan Jing knew the truth.

'You dare to kill me?' Princess Kang Hua asked. 'Do you dare to tell everyone Shi Ting isn't your blood daughter? Do you dare to tell everyone she is the daughter of your second wife rolling in bed with another man? Yan Jing, I know you well. You value pride, reputation

and status of a prime minister. You wouldn't cause yourself to lose dignity even if your true heart is ugly. In front of other people you would act dignified. Prime Minister Yan, isn't he someone other people respect? What respect? You wouldn't be prime minister if you didn't marry me! You say that I'm scum. But between the two of us, who is more of a scum?'

Yan Jing's face paled, he couldn't refute Princess Kang Hua's words.

Princess Kang Hua smiled coldly. 'Even if Shi Ting is a bastard child and isn't a Yan or even if you're disgusted, you can only tell everyone she is your daughter! Don't forget, the wedding is in three days. Yan Jing, that year because of your ambition you abandoned your wife and daughter. Today because you were deceived for more than sixteen years, can you abandon this marriage? Abandon the chance to be the future emperor's grandfather?'

Yan Jing didn't refute Princess Kang Hua's words. He silently stared at her cold arrogant face and felt his heart rotted. It was true, he wouldn't kill her or expose Yan Shi Ting's identity. He was going to swallow his grievances otherwise another person would use it as an opportunity to steal his position.

Yan Jing felt defeated. 'You're right! I desire success and status. This is my retribution. Kang Hua, from today onward there is no marriage between us. I never want to see you again.'

Princess Kang Hua watched the man she loved for decades leave without looking back at her. She sat and the memories appeared in her head.

Princess Kang Hua remembered that year she was a young lady. Her young self saw Yan Jing for the first time, he rode a horse. Afterward she met him at the former prime minister's manor and decided she wasn't going to marry anyone else but him. She confessed to him but he rejected her because he had a wife. So she put lust herbs into his wine and he slept with her. The following morning she was certain he would take responsibility but he rejected her again and apologised to her.

Princess Kang Hua thought her young self was laughable. She was a princess and lowered herself to love that kind of man but he rejected her love! From that day she vowed she would do anything to hold onto the man she loved. So she lied to Yan Jing, 'I'm pregnant. Big brother, if you don't marry me then I'll tell everyone about what you did. I'm a princess, I'm not going to accept being a second wife. You have to divorce your wife.'

Yan Jing rejected the young Princess Kang Hua again. He said he would rather die than divorce his wife and she was forced to accept being a second wife.

After Yan Jing married Princess Kang Hua, she thought her fake pregnancy would become a real pregnancy. But he rejected her again, 'You're pregnant, there's no hurry.'

The newly wedded Princess Kang Hua anxiously watched a few days past then she thought of a plan and acted out her plan. She remembered that night was a sensual night but it wasn't with the man she loved. So each time she remembered that night, her heart ached.

Princess Kang Hua's memories faded and she absently walked around the gardens.

A leaf fell onto the ground. Princess Kang Hua picked it up, the leaf was brown like her heart. More than sixteen years of marriage disappeared in front of her. It ripped off her mask and ended her love. She smiled coldly and muttered to herself. 'I still have Shi Ting! I have a daughter that will be empress! That's enough! I wasn't wrong! Everything happened because those people forced me!'

Chapter 38

The crown prince and Yan Shi Ting's wedding day was fated to be an auspicious day for some guests.

At the Yan Manor, the bride woke up early, wore her wedding dress and makeup.

‘Mother, have you noticed father has been strange the last three days?’ Yan Shi Ting asked. ‘He acts distant when I talk to him.’

‘Perhaps he’s busy with work,’ Princess Kang Hua lied.

‘Yes, you’re right,’ Yan Shi Ting said.

At Pei Jin’s manor, Yan Shi Ning prepared the wedding gifts.

Pei Jin hugged Yan Shi Ning. ‘Wife, you need to be careful.’

Yan Shi Ning kissed Pei Jin’s lips. ‘If I’m uncertain about the outcome then I won’t act.’

Pei Jin nodded his head. ‘I think seventh brother’s people are prepared too. Let them expose Yan Shi Ting’s deceit so we can watch an amusing performance. If seventh brother acts out a plan, he won’t be merciful.’

Night and day, Pei Jin cautioned Yan Shi Ning enough to make her laugh helplessly. ‘Pei Jin, when did you become a woman?’

Pei Jin rubbed his face on Yan Shi Ning’s neck. ‘I’m scared my little lion will be scared if she sees fresh blood.’

Yan Shi Ning felt Pei Jin’s lips on her neck and pushed him away. ‘Pei Jin, I know. Umm... don’t take off my dress... it took me a long time to wear it... umm...’

Pei Jin pouted his lips. He didn’t get to eat Yan Shi Ning but she got to hit him. ‘Wife, you don’t even let me touch you.’

Yan Shi Ning wanted to vomit blood. ‘If you want someone to touch then you can marry a second wife.’

Pei Jin rubbed his chin and nodded his head. ‘That’s a good sugges-’

Yan Shi Ning kicked Pei Jin’s leg. ‘Pei Jin, do you dare?’

Pei Jin laughed. He knew it was nearly time for the wedding so he adjusted Yan Shi Ning's dress. 'Wife, be careful inside the palace and at the Yan Manor. I'm worried Princess Kang Hua found out about the plan.'

Yan Shi Ning nodded her head.

'Remember today we need to perform well inside the palace,' Pei Jin said.

Yan Shi Ning pinched Pei Jin's ear. 'I know.'

Pei Jin escorted Yan Shi Ning to the horse carriage. Afterward he instructed Xiao Hui and Xiao Zai. 'Protect my wife and be weary of the princess.'

'Yes ninth prince,' Xiao Hui and Xiao Zai promised.

Unfortunately Pei Jin was the groom's brother and needed to wait at the palace for the bride while Yan Shi Ning was the bride's sister and needed to go to the Yan Manor and escort the bride to the palace.

The moment Yan Shi Ning arrived at the Yan Manor, she saw Yan Jing was welcoming guests. Her heart laughed coldly at the fake smile on Yan Jing's face.

Yan Shi Ning remembered a few days ago after she gave the letter to Yan Jing she returned home and asked Pei Jin to send Xiao Zai to eavesdrop at the Yan Manor.

Pei Jin confided in Yan Shi Ning that Xiao Zai had a special talent for eavesdropping. She didn't believe Pei Jin until Xiao Zai returned to the manor and reported Yan Jing and Princess Kang Hua's conversation without omitting anything. Also, Xiao Zai had a special talent of mimicking other people's voices. She was impressed after hearing Xiao Zai mimicked Yan Jing and Princess Kang Hua's voices.

Yan Jing spotted Yan Shi Ning, he smiled gratefully at her and escorted her to the bride's courtyard.

Yan Shi Ning kindly reminded Yan Jing to 'remember to rest' then she walked toward the bride's chamber.

On the way to Yan Shi Ting's chamber, Yan Shi Ning saw Princess Kang Hua in the courtyard and she smiled politely.

Princess Kang Hua straightened her back and looked wearily at Yan Shi Ning. She didn't understand why Yan Shi Ning used to lower her head and didn't dare to look at her but suddenly Yan Shi Ning dared to look at her on Yan Shi Ting's wedding day. It was Yan Shi Ning's eyes that looked like a hunter staring at a prey that made her wearier. The longer Yan Shi Ning looked at her the more she thought about the young beggars, the two letters, Yan Jing and who was the mysterious person behind everything.

Princess Kang Hua remembered what old nurse maid reported to her.

'Who did master meet that day?' Princess Kang Hua asked. 'Why did he remember his suspicions about Yan Shi Ting's identity?'

'Someone saw ninth prince's wife visited master that day,' old nurse maid said.

Suddenly Princess Kang Hua felt breathless in front of Yan Shi Ning. She raised her chin and quickly walked past Yan Shi Ning.

Yan Shi Ning smiled while she watched Princess Kang Hua poorly hide fear.

'Big sister, you're here,' Yan Shi Ting said.

'It's little sister's wedding day,' Yan Shi Ning said. 'I'm your big sister of course I need to be here. Today little sister is beautiful. The crown prince will be insanely happy to see you.'

Yan Shi Ting was happy to hear Yan Shi Ning praised her beauty. But she frowned to hear the crown prince's name mentioned. She didn't know why the crown prince hadn't delivered wedding gifts to her yet.

Yan Shi Ning poured two cups of tea and crushed a pill into one of the cups while no was looking at her.

'Little sister, drink tea,' Yan Shi Ning said. 'Later you'll be too busy to drink.'

Yan Shi Ting was thirsty. Her mother didn't let her drink earlier so she accepted the cup of tea and drank it.

Yan Shi Ning smiled, drank half a cup of tea and emptied the other half into a vase.

Two days ago Yan Shi Ning received the pills from Bei Dou.

'Big brother Bei, do you have medicine that causes a person stomach to hurt?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'Yes,' Bei Dou said and showed Yan Shi Ning some identical pills.

'Do I crush the pills?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'That's right,' Bei Dou said.

'Big brother Bei, can you give me these pills?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'Alright,' Bei Dou said and passed the pills to Yan Shi Ning.

Yan Shi Ning tested one of the pills on herself. Less than half a shichen hour later her stomach ached and she rushed to the toilet.

After Yan Shi Ning's legs wobbled from squatting for a long time she returned to Bei Dou's chamber.

'Big brother, what pills did you give me earlier?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'Laxatives,' Bei Dou said.

Yan Shi Ning and her stomach were speechless while Bei Dou was curious why Yan Shi Ning wanted laxatives.

Finally the bride and the bride's family arrived at the palace. The crown prince smiled coldly but Pei Jin smiled happily like he did on his and Yan Shi Ning's wedding day.

Pei Jin watched Yan Shi Ning helped the bride into the ceremonial hall and reminisced about their wedding day.

After Yan Shi Ning escorted Yan Shi Ting to the crown prince, she stood next to Pei Jin and he whispered in her ear. 'Wife, tonight let's have a wedding night too.'

Yan Shi Ning smiled like a gentle lady and she stepped on Pei Jin's foot. Then she turned her head and smiled at the anxious Princess Kang Hua.

The emperor and the empress sat on the highest platform. The emperor refrained from frowning while the empress smiled happily.

Pei Zhang wanted to rest but it was the crown prince's wedding day so he attended the wedding and acted weak next to the happy Consort Mu.

Consort Mu looked at Pei Wen Cai who sat on her lap. 'Wen Cai, do you remember what grandmother told you?'

Pei Wen Cai was busy glaring at Pei Khan who sat opposite her. 'Yes, grandmother.'

Pei Khan didn't notice Pei Wen Cai, he was waving his chubby hand at Yan Shi Ning. Then he patted the seat next to him to signal Yan Shi Ning to sit next to him.

Everyone behaved like their usual selves but their eyes were focused on the crown prince and Yan Shi Ting.

'It is the auspicious hour,' the ceremonial minister said. 'The groom and bride, bow to the heavens, your elders and to each other.'

Yan Shi Ting bowed to the heavens and to the elders. But her stomach ached a lot. After bowing to the crown prince, she collapsed on the floor.

The ceremonial hall immediately became chaotic.

Consort Mu exchanged a shocked look with seventh prince... their plan was to let Pei Wen Cai accidentally fall onto Yan Shi Ting's dress, Consort Mu would help Pei Wen Cai up and throw blood onto Yan Shi Ting's wedding dress then Consort Mu would ask for an imperial physician to check if Yan Shi Ting had a miscarriage. The imperial physician that day was one of their allies and would have reported to the emperor that Yan Shi Ting wasn't pregnant.

Consort Mu and seventh prince didn't act out their plan but Yan Shi Ting fell on her own.

Consort Mu rushed to Yan Shi Ting, discreetly threw blood on Yan Shi Ting's dress and helped Yan Shi Ting stand.

'What happened?' the emperor asked.

The empress panicked. 'I... I... I...'

'Blood, blood!' Pei Khan cried out and pointed at the blood stain on the floor.

Everyone's eyes looked at the spot Pei Khan was pointing to.

Yan Shi Ting stood, her veil fell on the floor and she endured her stomach ache. But her body stiffened after she heard blood... the blood was on the spot she fell on earlier.

Yan Shi Ting was scared her step-aunt arrived. She looked at the back of her dress and her face whitened at the blood stain on her dress.

'Ah!' Consort Mu cried out. 'There's blood on the bride's dress. Where's the imperial physician?'

The emperor's face darkened, he was worried his unborn grandchild returned to the heavens.

‘Hurry, someone bring an imperial physician here!’ the emperor ordered.

Short Side Story One

On a cool day, Pei Jin was smiling while watching little Fei sleeping peacefully in a cot. Little Fei’s lips were pouting like little Fei was dreaming about drinking milk. It reminded Pei Jin of a past incident at the Yan Manor.

Pei Jin walked out into the courtyard where Yan Shi Ning was sitting on a swing and eating a peach.

‘Shi Ning, do you believe in testing blood relations using drops of blood and a bowl of water?’ Pei Jin asked.

‘I believe it’s true,’ Yan Shi Ning said. ‘Isn’t that’s how blood relations were tested in the past?’

Pei Jin nodded his head and smiled at Yan Shi Ning. ‘Little lion, let’s see if the test is true.’

‘Pei Jin, what do you want to do?’ Yan Shi Ning asked suspiciously.

A while later, little Fei was awake and crying loudly.

Yan Shi Ning’s heart ached. She carried little Fei in her arms and consoled little Fei.

‘MF Pei Jin, how can you do this to little Fei?’ Yan Shi Ning asked.

Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning watched little Fei’s blood dropped into a bowl of water... little Fei’s blood didn’t merge with the other drop of blood.

Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning were shocked.

‘Yan-Shi-Ning!’ Pei Jin cried out. ‘Wife, confess!’

Yan Shi Ning knocked the bowl of water out of Pei Jin's hand. 'MF Pei Jin! What are you implying?'

Pei Jin hugged Yan Shi Ning. 'Wife, don't be angry. I was teasing you.'

Yan Shi Ning was too angry to speak anymore.

After that cool day, Pei Jin was banished to the calligraphy room for half a month. He was starved enough for his eye bags to swell and he secretly wrote on a wall, 'don't believe in testing blood relations with drops of blood and a bowl of water!'

Short Interview One

Su Xing Yue: Xiao Jin, you truly didn't suspect Xiao Ning?

Pei Jin: I trust Shi Ning isn't that kind of person.

Su Xing Yue: Why are you certain?

Pei Jin: I roll around with my wife day and night. How can she have time to let me wear a headgear of a fool?

Su Xing Yue: ...

Chapter 39

The emperor's first grandchild wasn't Pei Wen Cai.

Seventh prince's official wife miscarried a child before Pei Wen Cai, the emperor's first grandchild was a boy and he still grieved for his unborn grandson.

The emperor had thirteen children but only four sons were alive. The seventh prince shared a similar fate with the emperor, he had many wives but they had many miscarriages and only Pei Wen Cai was alive.

The citizens of the Dian kingdom were worried about the lack of future imperial heirs. That was why even though the emperor disapproved of Yan Shi Ting, he tolerated her for the sake of his unborn grandchild. So no one in the imperial family was surprised to see the emperor's concern after seeing Yan Shi Ting bleed.

'Emperor, you don't need to summon an imperial physician,' the empress said. 'It'll be bad luck if the imperial physician appears before the end of the wedding ceremony-'

'Bad luck?' Consort Mu asked. 'Big sister, the bride is bleeding. Her life is more important than superstitions.'

Consort Mu's words stabbed the empress' heart. The empress saw the feigned concern on Consort Mu's face and she realised it was the demoness Consort Mu who interfered with her scheme. The empress didn't doubt that Consort Mu knew about Yan Shi Ting's fake pregnancy long ago, Consort Mu waited until the wedding day to expose Yan Shi Ting and to appear innocent while opposing the empress.

The emperor ignored the empress and Consort Mu's battle of words.

'Hurry and bring an imperial physician here!' the emperor ordered.

An imperial physician rushed into the ceremonial hall and Yan Shi Ting panicked.

'I don't need an imperial physician,' Yan Shi Ting said.

Yan Shi Ting recognised the imperial physician wasn't one of the empress' allies and wouldn't know about her fake pregnancy. If she was exposed on her wedding day, it would also be the day of her funeral.

Yan Shi Ting knew no one could save her and she couldn't stop the imperial physician from examining her. She cried helplessly and she couldn't endure her stomach ache any longer... she farted and soiled her undergarments.

Everyone around Yan Shi Ting pinched their noses and stepped back from Yan Shi Ting's unpleasant stench.

Yan Shi Ting was angry and embarrassed. She knelt on the floor, covered her face and cried loudly. Her wedding dress was ruined, her makeup disappeared and she looked like a pitiful bride jilted by the groom.

Pei Jin held Yan Shi Ning's hand. He knew she wasn't cruel enough to feel happy seeing Yan Shi Ting shed fresh blood from their plan.

'Imperial physician, what happened to Yan Shi Ting?' the emperor asked.

'It was a beautiful wedding ceremony... why did it become like this?' Consort Mu asked. 'Imperial physician, stop stalling. Hurry and examine the crown prince's wife!'

The imperial physician reluctantly stepped closer to Yan Shi Ting. He heard 'the crown prince's wife' and knew the wedding ceremony wouldn't end happily. 'Lady Yan, let me examine you.'

The imperial physician knelt beside Yan Shi Ting but she refused to let him hold her wrist.

'I don't need to be examined!' Yan Shi Ting said.

'Hurry and let the imperial physician examine you,' Consort Mu said. 'You're bleeding. Can't you see the emperor is worried about you?'

Yan Shi Ting looked at the emperor's concerned face. Then she looked pleadingly at the empress and the crown prince. 'Aunt! Big brother crown prince! The imperial physician doesn't need to examine me.'

The empress saw everyone was looking at her and her heart hardened. 'Shi Ting, let the imperial physician examine you.'

Yan Shi Ting's body turned cold, the empress and the crown prince turned their backs on her.

The imperial physician examined Yan Shi Ting while she absently looked at the empress and the crown prince.

‘Strange...’ the imperial physician said.

Most of the wedding guests were worried something was wrong with Yan Shi Ting and the rest anticipated the imperial physician’s explanation.

‘Imperial physician, hurry and report to the emperor,’ Consort Mu said and feigned concern.

Consort Mu heard news about Yan Shi Ting’s fake pregnancy. But the empress’ calmness made Consort Mu uneasy that the news wasn’t true. Whether Consort Mu could defeat the empress and the crown prince depended on the outcome of the imperial physician’s explanation.

‘Strange?’ the emperor asked.

The imperial physician stood and kowtowed in front of the emperor. ‘Your majesty, Lady Yan is healthy. Your majesty, forgive me but I don’t know why she’s bleeding.’

‘Healthy?’ the emperor asked.

The emperor should have been relieved to hear Yan Shi Ting was healthy but he felt like the heavens struck him.

‘Your majesty is right,’ the imperial physician said. ‘Lady Yan is healthy.’

The emperor stepped off the platform, grabbed the imperial physician’s collar and spoke softly. ‘Is she pregnant?’

The bulged green veins on the emperor’s forehead intimidated the imperial physician.

'Your majesty, I don't know why she's bleeding but... she's not pregnant,' the imperial physician whispered.

The emperor took a deep breath, pushed the imperial physician, turned round and glared at the empress.

Most of the wedding guests didn't understand why the emperor was angry if Yan Shi Ting was healthy.

'Empress, do you know what the punishment for deceiving the emperor is?' the emperor asked coldly.

The empress kowtowed in front of the emperor and cried pitifully. 'Emperor, I was deceived too. I didn't know anything.'

Consort Mu narrowed her eyes. She was shocked and resented the empress. Her heart cursed the empress, 'Kang Thi, your cruelty is impressive! You can sacrifice anyone to protect your son. That's your niece, your blood little sister's daughter but you have no mercy!'

Yan Shi Ning and Pei Jin exchanged a secret look then they lowered their heads... they underestimated the empress' cruelty.

Yan Shi Ting widened her eyes, stared at the empress and forgot to cry. What empress was deceived? Lies! The first person who suggested she should fake a pregnancy to force the crown prince to marry her sooner was the empress! The empress and her mother discussed the plan together!

The empress raised her head and accused Yan Shi Ting. 'Shi Ting! Has your aunt mistreated you? Why did you deceive me?'

'Aunt...' Yan Shi Ting said.

'Empress, you and Kang Hua are sisters!' the emperor said.

The empress turned her head to face the skeptical emperor and she continued to cry. 'Emperor, you and I have been married for many years. You know what kind of person I am. I have never deceived you. I

was deceived by Kang Hua. I don't know anything. Emperor, please investigate this situation. Xiao Lam, say something.'

The emperor looked at the crown prince. He knew the crown prince was an honest person and he wanted to believe the crown prince's words.

Yan Shi Ting looked at the crown prince. She didn't know what the crown prince would say. Would he save her?

Pei Lam stood still while everyone looked at him and waited for his reply.

Pei Lam lowered his head and thought deeply. Everyone was anxious but his heart was calm. He remembered Yan Shi Ting cried for mercy, a pity it only amused him. She had no relation to him. He was overjoyed she was exposed because he could escape her... but in his lifetime he couldn't escape his cage... unless his words could find an escape for him.

Pei Lam pursed his lips, hid his joy and kowtowed in front of his father. 'Imperial father, truly imperial mother and I don't know anything. We were deceived by aunt's lies.'

Yan Shi Ting looked at the crown prince who calmly lied.

'Since I was young, aunt always wanted me to marry Shi Ting,' the crown prince said. 'I don't love Shi Ting and refused to marry Shi Ting many times... but at a palace banquet Shi Ting put lust herbs into my wine. Then she threatened me... I felt helpless and agreed to marry her. Yet she's this shameless and faked a pregnancy to ensure I marry her.'

All the wedding guests understood what happened and they looked scornfully at Yan Shi Ting.

Yan Shi Ting didn't care how the wedding guests looked at her. She continued to look at the crown prince who was intimate with her many times. Her sky collapsed and there was only chaos.

Yan Shi Ting heard 'lust herbs, threatened and shameless.' Why did the crown prince lie? Why did the crown prince wanted to push her toward execution? Why did he pour dirty water on her head in front of everyone?

Yan Shi Ting stood and pointed at the crown prince and the empress.

'No!' Yan Shi Ting said. 'You're a liar! Don't believe them!'

Chapter 40

Pei Lam looked coldly at Yan Shi Ting.

'Yan Shi Ting, look at the evidence and see if you're not the liar,' Pei Lam said. He turned his head and looked at his father. 'Imperial father, she has been sending me threatening letters. If imperial father doesn't believe me, imperial father can summon the palace maids and eunuchs here. Imperial father, look at her, she's a shameless woman and deserves to die.'

'No!' Yan Shi Ting said. 'Don't believe him. He's lying! I'm not shameless! It was my mother who told me to do this, I didn't know anything! Big brother crown prince, since you were a little boy you said you loved me! Why are you lying?'

The emperor heard Yan Shi Ting's pitiful cries. He didn't understand why an auspicious day turned into a nightmare. He was too angry, his blood flowed chaotically. He stood and spoke heartlessly. 'Hurry and take her away!'

Yan Shi Ting's loud cries slowly faded from the ceremonial hall.

The wedding guests were about to leave too but the crown prince suddenly broke the silence.

'Imperial father, I'm unfilial,' Pei Lam said. 'I let imperial father be deceived and shamed the imperial family. Imperial father, I request you

take away my crown prince position. I'm willing to be banished from the palace and do good deeds in remote places to ask the ancestors to forgive me.'

The wedding guests were stunned and the empress was scared to death. But Consort Mu lowered her head and hid her joy.

'What did you say?' the emperor asked.

'Imperial father, I have shamed you,' Pei Lam said. 'Imperial father, take away my crown prince position.'

The emperor vomited blood.

'Your majesty!' the wedding guests cried out.

The crown prince and Yan Shi Ting's wedding wasn't an auspicious day, it was a tragedy and all the wedding guests quickly retreated from the ceremonial hall.

In the horse carriage Yan Shi Ning hugged Pei Jin. Her heart and hands were cold and trembling. She couldn't stop thinking about the image of Yan Shi Ting being dragged outside the ceremonial hall and Yan Shi Ting's pitiful cries. She was too scared to think about what was going to happen to Yan Shi Ting.

Pei Jin hugged Yan Shi Ning's cold body tighter and held her hands.

'Pei Jin, what do you think will happen to Yan Shi Ting?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'She would have been executed,' Pei Jin said. 'But now she's trapped in an insane state for life.'

Yan Shi Ning's heart felt remorse.

'Pei Jin, was I too cruel?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'Shi Ning, if it's done then you don't need to think about if it's right or wrong,' Pei Jin said. 'It's not your fault alone that she's insane.'

Yan Shi Ning felt colder after she remembered the empress and the crown prince's heartlessness. 'Pei Jin, the palace is a dangerous place.'

'Shi Ning, the palace has always been a dangerous place,' Pei Jin said.

Pei Jin hugged Yan Shi Ning and stared out the window. His heart was relieved his Shi Ning wasn't heartless.

After escorting Yan Shi Ting to the palace, Princess Kang Hua returned to the Yan Manor.

Yan Jing drank with the guests at the Yan Manor. Neither he nor Princess Kang Hua knew why Yan Shi Ting returned to the Yan Manor, because she was supposed to be the bride at the wedding ceremony in the palace.

Yan Jing also didn't know why Yan Shi Ting was dancing and singing like a fool.

'What happened?' Yan Jing asked.

'Prime Minister Yan, wait at home for the news,' the ceremonial minister said coldly and left.

Yan Jing and Princess Kang Hua sent servants to the palace to find out why Yan Shi Ting was behaving like a fool and the servants returned with bad news.

Princess Kang Hua's life dream shattered, her daughter was insane and her older sister stabbed her heart.

Yan Jing slapped Princess Kang Hua. 'Scum! Look at your good deeds! You dare to let your daughter fake a pregnancy. Do you know what happens if you deceive the emperor? Death!'

'You dare hit me?' Princess Kang Hua asked.

'I want to kill you!' Yan Jing said. 'You've pulled me into your mess!'

Princess Kang Hua laughed coldly. 'So what? You die and I die. We'll die together!'

Yan Jing left Princess Kang Hua's chamber and she fell into depression.

That evening an elderly lady secretly travelled by horse carriage to visit Princess Kang Hua at the Yan Manor.

Princess Kang Hua was coaxing the insane Yan Shi Ting to sleep when she heard a knock on the door. She opened the door and was scared to see who visited her in the middle of the night.

'Kang Hua, no one wanted this outcome,' the elderly lady said. 'The emperor is ill so he's not pursuing this matter now. But after he recovers, I fear it'll be bad for everyone involved. I know you're not the only one responsible but to protect your family, you need to take all the responsibility. My daughter, I'm sorry it's been hard for you.'

The elderly lady stood, put a small bottle on a table and left the Yan Manor.

Princess Kang Hua picked up the bottle, sat on a chair and her usual cold arrogance died.

In the palace the emperor was recovering in his chamber. Two years ago the emperor was ill and ingested many medicine to regain his health. No one expected the emperor would fall ill again on his tenth son's wedding day.

Consort Mu and seventh prince were anxious about the emperor's health. They didn't want the emperor to die before announcing the new crown prince.

There were also people in the shadows that didn't care if the emperor died. If the emperor died then Pei Lam would sit on the throne and seventh prince's supporters would clash swords with Pei Lam's supporters. Even if seventh prince stole the throne, the citizens of Dian Kingdom would rebel because the seventh prince wasn't the true heir. Then both Pei Lam and seventh prince would be eliminated.

While the emperor's health was uncertain the Yan Manor's doors were locked. Princess Kang Hua took care of the insane Yan Shi Ting who continuously laughed and cried. Yan Jing pretended to be ill and didn't attend imperial court meetings at the palace. He knew he would lose his prime minister position but he needed time to think about how to save his life.

At Pei Jin's manor, Yan Shi Ning and Pei Jin speculated about the emperor's health in their courtyard.

'Pei Jin, do you think the emperor will recover?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'Yes,' Pei Jin said.

'When?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

Yan Shi Ning was anxious what the emperor would do to the people who deceived the emperor.

Pei Jin fed Yan Shi Ning a mandarin segment.

'Soon,' Pei Jin said.

'Isn't the emperor seriously ill?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'Imperial father is someone who values image,' Pei Jin said. 'He'll want to kill everyone involved. Even if the empress and tenth brother cut off relations with Princess Kang Hua, imperial father isn't fooled by them. But imperial father can only pretend to cooperate with them because there were too many witnesses that day. He didn't want others to see that an emperor of a kingdom was deceived by his wife and son. He can't swallow his anger but he can feign an illness. It'll give him time to calm down and for everyone's attention to be diverted from the situation. Then he'll punish everyone involved. Shi Ning, you should know imperial father loves to punish other people.'

'What will the emperor do?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

‘Imperial father chose to believe the empress and tenth brother in front of everyone,’ Pei Jin said. ‘It means he’ll collect fake evidence to protect them and blame everything on Princess Kang Hua and Yan Shi Ting. So the Yan Manor will be in trouble and the empress is safe for now.’

‘A pity,’ Yan Shi Ning said.

‘There’s no hurry,’ Pei Jin said. ‘Didn’t I say imperial father loves to punish other people? He’ll wait for another opportunity to punish them for their deceit. Shi Ning, soon tenth brother won’t be the crown prince anymore. After that happens the empress will wither.’

‘Pei Jin, do you think the crown prince truly doesn’t want the throne?’ Yan Shi Ning asked.

Pei Jin shook his head. ‘Honestly, in the palace tenth brother is someone I don’t understand the most.’